LATE DECEMBER, 1936 EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

WEST

Every Other Friday One Shilling

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Adventurers All

DRY LAND DIVING

EARLY in 1925 I was one of an American drilling crew working on a new well on the outskirts of a well-known oil field in Mexico.

We had only been drilling for a few days when I came on "tour" at midnight with my driller, Tommy Haskins, to learn that the evening tour crew had lost the tools in the one hundred and seventy foot hole. The drilling line had parted directly above the rope-socket.

The toolpusher was very much in evidence and was giving the unfortunate ones a piece of his extremely broad mind.

Changing our clothes in the doghouse, preparatory to taking over, Haskins swore mightily, and the driller responsible for the mess added insult to injury by waving an airy farewell and suggesting that we have the lost tools out when he returned the following noon.

Changed, we joined the irate toolpusher on the floor and commenced to rig-up a string of fishing tools. These lost in the hole measured sixty feet from top to bottom, which meant that we had a hundred and ten feet in which to fish for them.

When everything was in readiness we tied an old pail, filled with soft soap, to the bottom of the bailor, open side down. We ran it down the hole until it touched the top of the missing tools. When we pulled it up again the impression of the top of the rope-socket was clearly visible in the soap.

The toolpusher gave one look and groaned aloud:

"They've fallen against the side of the hole," he moaned. "We'll never get a fishing tool over them."

We both agreed with him but there was nothing to do except try.

Three days later, with badly frayed tempers, we were still trying.

On the fourth night Haskins and I arrived to find the general manager waiting for us in company with the toolpusher. The former called both crews together and asked the drillers if they had any suggestions to offer, explaining that the company was in a hurry for the well.

"The best thing we can do is skid the rig fifty feet and start a new hole," Haskins growled. The other driller nodded agreement as did the tooldresser. I started to but an idea hit me.

"Listen, why not lower me down the hole and let me try straightening up the tools?" I asked.

They all stared at me as though I had gone crazy.

"Lower you down the hole?" the toolpusher echoed. "How the devil could we do that? Your feet wouldn't pass the tools and you couldn't bend down in a twenty-two inch hole."

I hadn't thought of that but Haskins offered another suggestion.

"When I was working in the Ranger field

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two years ago, a guy went down fifty feet head first to get a set of slips," he offered.

They all looked at me again and I suddenly regretted my suggestion. They all seemed so eager to let me try.

"I probably couldn't get down at all," I said weakly.

The general manager looked me over with a critical eye.

"I think you could," he said in a hopeful voice. "Do you really want to try?"

Having it put squarely up to me I could only nod dumbly. Immediately they began to discuss ways and means. After some argument it was decided that I should be lowered on the end of the drilling line.

While I sat and watched, the others broke down the fishing tools and cut the line loose from the drilling socket.

When they had finished I took off my coat and rolled my shirt sleeves down, tying them at the wrist. I then donned a cap and a pair of cotton gloves. The toolpusher handed me a flashlight while the two drillers tied my legs together at ankles and knees with rope. Then they wrapped me in rags to the waist and tied the drilling line about my ankles. The general manager gave me a short pinchbar.

It took ten minutes to get things ready to everyone's satisfaction, and by then my legs were numb from the tightness of the line and rope. Finally the toolpusher nodded and Haskins went to the throttle of the engine and the other driller to the brake.

The toolpusher and manager raised me from the floor and opening the throttle, Haskins took up enough slack in the line to let me hang head down a few feet above the floor.

Quickly the other tooldresser tied the flashlight around my neck with soft rope and then steered me over the mouth of the hole.

I saw Haskins signal the driller at the brake and then reverse the engine. Then my head dropped below the level of the rig floor.

Slowly and steadily I went down into the hole, by the light of the flash I could see the muddy walls slipping past. There was not any too much clearance.

Suddenly I began to rotate; then my shoulders struck the wall and the motion stopped. I could see the mouth of the hole between my feet and the wall. It grew smaller.

It seemed that I was dropping at a tremendous speed. The blood in my head seemed to be pressing against the top of my skull. The pinchbar began to weigh a ton.

Suddenly I was terribly afraid. I imagined that Haskins would not stop the

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engine in time and I would crash head first against the tools and lodge there, while hundreds of feet of slack drilling line piled on top of me and slowly crushed me to death. I felt I was in a trap and wanted to scream at them to pull me up. I didn't though.

Then by the light of the flashlight I saw the tools below me. They seemed to leap at me. I yelled at the top of my lungs and the next instant stopped with a jerk that nearly broke my neck.

The tools were only three feet below me; the top of the rope socket deep into the wall.

I pushed the pinchbar between the wall and the tools a little below the top and tried to exert some leverage to force the latter out. But I found at once I couldn't do it. My head was splitting now.

I yelled at them to lower me a little and the next instant my head hit the tools. Frantically I placed my arms around them and tried to throw myself backwards. I could only move a few inches and the strain on my body was terrific. For an instant I thought the tools would not budge then they slowly straightened up, huge chunks of earth falling as they did so.

Then for the first time I realized that we had made no provisions for holding the tools away from the wall when I released them. I groaned in sheer misery and then suddenly thought of the pinchbar that hung from my wrist. It was only about eighteen inches long and I drove it horizontally into the wall and leaned the tools against it. To my great relief the top of the rope socket did not sink in again, but stayed out several inches.

I yelled at them to haul me up and with a jerk I started. This time Haskins cocked the engine wide. The next instant I shot out into the rig again and went half way up it before the driller at the brake could use it. A moment later I was laying on my back looking up at five anxious faces. I nodded and tried to say something but things went black.

I woke up in the company emergency hospital the next day, stiff and sore. My head ached like the devil and continued to do so for days afterward.

That afternoon the general manager came in to see me. They had managed to get the tools out. He was enthusiastic and promised a nice bonus. I didn't thank him much, for I felt I had earned it.

However, it would take the combined Army, Navy and Marines to get me to do any more dry land diving. I'm older and have lots more sense now (I hope). To paraphrase an old proverb, "There's no fool like a young fool."

A. Pearce

THE TWO-GUN SHERIFF

A NOVEL BY

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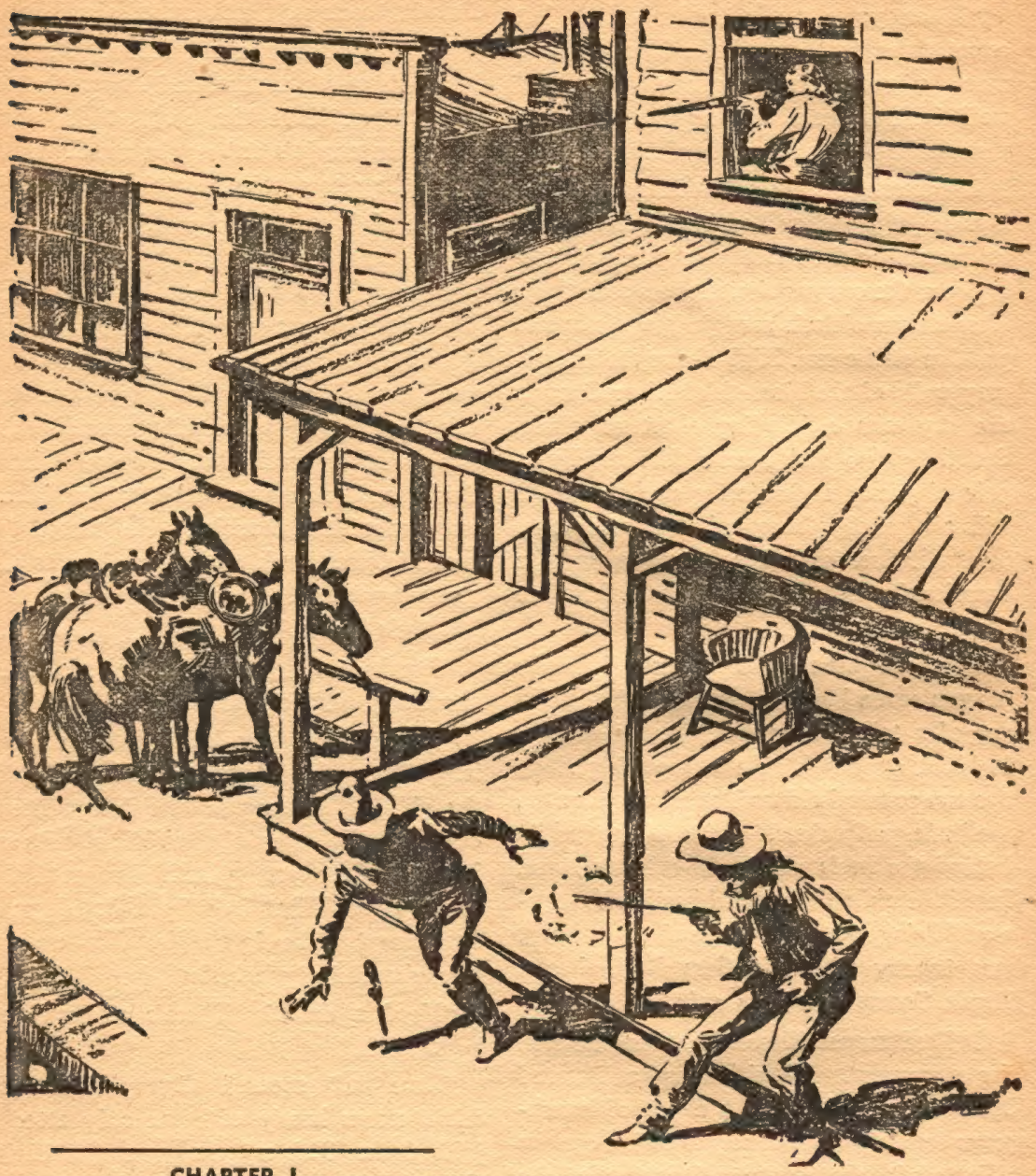
Sheriff Dave Carson Was Bound For Hell's Own Nest Of Human Wolves. He Was Sure He Could Clean Up The Town If He Got By Piggy McQuard's Bushwhacking Sidewinders—And If He Lived Long Enough Once He Got There . . .

OF PAINTED ROCK



CHAPTER I
Killers in Ambush

The muddy-brown right eye of the red-bearded giant lying flat on his broad stomach in the rocks and willows on the western bank of the river had become a round dot. The wide Mongolian face under the stiff brim of the big, sage-green hat had become tense. Even the thick muss of fire-colored beard covering the face had ceased to quiver.

The man eased his rifle forward, laid it down gently, and spoke from the side of his mouth to the thick-set, black-bearded man of forty-five lying two yards to his left.

"Remember, we ain't gonna miss 'im, Frank," he cautioned. "He ain't that kind. Not from all we've heard about 'im. Give 'im a few minutes more. That bend in

the trail will bring 'im mighty close. Two hundred yards at the most."

"When yo're ready to let drive, just count three," whispered the black-bearded man. "Count slow an' gentle. At 'three' we'll both squeeze our triggers, Sam. I never miss—if yuh need remindin' of it."

It was one of those bright Monday mornings in July. They had been there within an hour after the Montana sun came stealing over the canyon rim. It was something after eleven o'clock now, judging from the position of the sun. High above the smooth gray walls of the Horsethief River Canyon the sky was a blinding sheet of silver, dotted by two tiny specks that marked a pair of young eagles lazily circling in the still air. Only the steady murmuring of the swift river behind the two men and the occasional sounds of their voices had broken the silence for hours.

But now, just rounding a bend down the canyon seven hundred yards away, the figure of a tall slender man dressed entirely in black appeared. He was coming along the sun-parched old trail at an easy canter, the little, puffy clouds of dust rising jerkily behind the heels of his sleek black horse. In a little while the gradual bend in the trail would bring him close to the river, and that was exactly what big Sam Bullard and Frank Crumpshaw were waiting for.

Bullard moved his rifle butt to one side for a moment. He picked up a battered brass telescope lying in a clump of bunchgrass beside him. Lifting it to his eye, he adjusted it, the empty red pocket of the left eye blinking and jerking. For a few seconds he studied the rider intently. A satisfied chuckle came from his heavy lips as he laid down the old telescope and glanced at Crumpshaw again.

"It's Dave Carson, all right." He smacked his lips. "Big, ivory-handled sixguns at his hips, high up an' well for'ard. Don't look so much like the slick gunman his rep calls for. A mite too youngish an' handsome-like. Heap of sand, I guess. It takes plenty of it for a lone yap to head for Painted Rock an' that damned sheriff job.

"We've got to take 'im, Frank. Remember, he's worth a thousand dollars in our pants if we leave him cold. He's worth seventeen cussin's an' maybe a belt in the jaw if he gets past us."

"He ain't gonna get past."

Crumpshaw's voice was a grunt. He was never a talkative man on a job like this. For an hour he had been tense, watching the canyon rims above them in this lonely spot twelve miles south of the lawless mining and cattle town of Painted Rock, far back in the wild ranges and deep canyons of the Rockies. He turned his head, looking back along the river to the grassy spot in the rocks where they had left their horses.

"Don't let his gun-slingin' rep spoil yore shootin'," warned Bullard.

"Quit talkin' yorese'f into a scare about it." Crumpshaw bit the words out from the side of his mouth. "Yuh act like a duck already enjoyin' the shakes. Do as I said. Keep yore mouth shut until the time's ripe. What I do I do, an' damn a man's rep! The first bullet allus counts, even shootin' a grizzly."

"Need a drink? There's a couple of bottles left."

"Save it," sneered Crumpshaw. "A drink comes handy with me only atter a job's done. Pick up yore gun. Our bird's almost close enough. Plenty close for me, but I want yuh to be sure."

Silence gripped them now. Their rifles were coming up without a sound. Gently the hammers were drawn back. The rider in front of them was almost at the bend of the trail. His horse ceased cantering, slowing to a long-legged walk.

"One!"

Bullard's voice was low, a faint hiss. The muddy-brown right eye had become

hard and glinty down the sights of his rifle. He expelled his breath, and inhaled another.

"Two!"

The rider was hard against the sights of the rifle now. He lifted his hands, licking his cigarette. Bullard's voice came like a gasp.

"Three!"

Two shots crashed as one, the rolling, reverberating reports wallowing away up and down the canyon. The man on the horse jerked tense. The horse stopped. For a split-second Bullard thought they had missed.

"Pump it in 'im!" he gasped. "Quick, Frank!"

Crumpshaw's rifle was crashing again before he could finish. Hands moving upward, jerking and trembling, the rider careened to the right in his saddle now. The horse jumped, whirling to one side. The man fell, going down head-first. Crumpshaw and Bullard fired again, taking quick, careful aim.

"Got 'im!" whispered Bullard. "Got 'im with ever' shot!"

"Now gimme one of them bottles," snarled Crumpshaw. "Now's the time I allus needs a drink, Sam."

He stood up, crouching as he spoke. Rolling over on his right side, Bullard sat up, too. He jerked a quart bottle of whiskey from his shirt, handed it to Crumpshaw. With nervous hands, Crumpshaw wrung out the cork. He straightened, the bottle going to his lips.

Like a man dying with a sudden thirst, he rocked back, gulping the whiskey down his throat. He half-emptied the bottle, lowering it to get his breath. At that instant something struck him, catching him in the side of the mouth, slitting it almost back to his right ear.

It was a rifle bullet. From down the canyon now rolled the report of the shot. Crumpshaw looked, yelped, the blood flying from the long tear there in the side of his face.

"Good Gawd, Sam, *look!*"

A second horseman had appeared. In almost every way, at that distance, he looked exactly like the man who had been shot down, in the bend of the trail. He was off his horse now, standing well to one side of the animal.

Even as Crumpshaw and Bullard looked at him, another white puff came from the rifle at his shoulder. A bullet sang a wild, weird song through the air, slap-slapping against the rocks, glancing the bole of a tree and whining away in the still morning air.

"Gawd A'mighty!" roared Bullard. "There musta been two Dave Carson's, Frank!"

CHAPTER II

War in the Canyon

For an hour or more, during that ride to Painted Rock to take over a job nobody in a hundred mile circle seemed to want to touch with a ten-foot pole, Dave Carson had been trying to overtake the man on the black horse ahead of him.

There was something confoundedly familiar in the way the man ahead swung along on his long-legged horse. Carson had a feeling that he knew that broad, straight back, those thrown-back shoulders, and the easy, graceful way in which the rider rode.

Once he had been within a mile of the man, but that had been back there when he was following the canyon rim. Not once had he been able to attract the rider's attention. He had even fired his six-shooters into the air, but he had been up on the high rim with a sharp wind blowing, and the sounds had failed to reach the rider below.

Swinging hot on the trail at last, he had been no more than eight hundred yards

behind when the man had rounded the bend in the canyon. And then Carson had been in time to hear the rifles crashing and see the rider straighten in his saddle, careen to one side, and fall.

It was murder—dry-gulching a man in the worst possible way. It had looked to Carson as if the rider had lifted his hands, asking for quarter, and even after he was on the ground those rifles in the rocks had blazed lead into the helpless figure.

This was blood! Out of his saddle, rifle

jerked from its old boot under the left sweat-leather, Carson ran to one side of his horse and prepared to enter the fight.

It was long shooting, but something told him his bullet had done damage to the man he had seen standing up with his arms lifted. At his second shot, as if too surprised to move at the first, the man had bobbed down and out of sight.

Now the men in the rocks were returning the fire. Carson caught a glimpse of the two puffs of smoke jerking their grayish rings forward. Two bullets cried through the air close to him.

He leaped to one side, darted toward a pile of rocks and brush at the head of a dry little ravine streaking its zig-zagging way toward the river. As he ducked out of sight a bullet struck the rocks to his left, glanced, hit another rock above him, and dropped, a hot, badly-battered little pellet of lead and shiny steel.

One of those men could shoot. That was certain. The second proved himself an expert a few seconds later. Two bullets droned into the rocks, slap-slapped viciously, glanced, and cried away with a sharp shrilling. There followed two more shots, each as close as the others, showing that the men up there on the bank of the river had no intention of turning tail to the opening fight.

Carson fired twice and moved on down the ravine, hoping to get to the river, across it, and come up on the men from behind. Two more bullets struck the rocks behind him. Then an ugly silence filled the canyon, holding for several minutes while Carson hurried on toward the river.

The cold-blooded, cowardly shooting had told him a number of things. Mainly it had told him that the men in the rocks had mistaken the first rider, had shot him down thinking he was the new officer for Painted Rock. That meant that Painted Rock knew about his coming to take the place of old Pat Berry, the sheriff who had been found ten days before lying murdered at his desk in the ramshackle jail at the head of Painted Rock's saloon-lined street, a long-bladed knife buried to the hilt in his back.

Somebody had passed the news on the run to somebody else in Painted Rock. It meant that he had been watched from the moment he had promised to take Berry's place five days ago down in Saddle Buttes, the wild, whiskey-fighting town that he had tamed in four months.

Somebody was up here now waiting for him—somebody who evidently meant to see to it that he didn't get to Painted Rock.

But the thing that troubled him most was the thought of that rider lying in the bend of the old trail. He tried to put the man out of his thoughts. He tried to tell himself that he was mistaken. But the rider kept appearing before him, every move a familiar one, stirring some memory out of the past that stung him to the bone.

A bullet whining a few yards in front of him was proof that the men in the rocks knew he was making his way down the ravine. Another bullet came a few minutes later. They struck a flat rock, raking long, ugly white streaks in the soft stone.

Carson stopped, and studied the marks in the rocks. They had struck almost at the same place, and had rooted out the two grooves in the rock almost exactly alike. They were too damned much alike!

They told their own story. They told him that only one man was shooting at the ravine, and there could be but two reasons for it—either one of the men had been too badly wounded to keep up the firing, or he had slipped away to cut him, Carson, off with a surprise attack somewhere near the river.

The latter seemed the most logical. Two more bullets struck the rim of the ravine. The shots were spaced just about far enough apart for a man to operate the bolt or the loading-lever of a rifle. Carson knew they were fired only to attract his attention, for it was a certainty that the men could not see him.

At the end of a hundred yards Carson left the ravine, swinging to the left up a little wash. The shots kept sounding, always two of them at a time. Down on his hands and knees, he came to a fork in the wash, swung to his right, headed for the river again. The wash ran through a little thicket of jackpines, and there Carson halted, daring to lift his head.

"You're a smart guy, all right," he whispered. "Right bright, I'd call it—but where did your good pardner go?"

Concealed by the trees and a few grayish rocks, he eased out of the wash and dropped flat on his stomach, his rifle ready.

TWO more shots crashed and rolled down the canyon. Carson thought he heard the bullets *thud-thud*-ing in the grassy earth. A short, ugly silence followed. He lay still, waiting patiently.

At last, looking at a thicket of jackpines across the river, Carson saw a round, dark-bearded face under the flopping brim of an old gray hat. There was only time enough for a glimpse of it. The man was moving rapidly, evidently having waded the river at a shallow ford. In a few minutes the fellow would be in a position to command the mouth of the ravine where it opened in the river bank.

It was a smart move. Carson gave the man credit for that. It told him that the man could think in a pinch. It told him, too, that somebody in Painted Rock was making it hell-fired certain that no new sheriff arrived to take over the business of reëstablishing law and order in that town where a mere handful of lawless men ruled everything and everybody.

There was an abrupt knoll slightly to his left and a hundred yards away. Carson slipped back into the wash and scurried along rapidly. In a place or two he was able to get up and run in a crouching position.

Reaching that knoll, worming his way up the side of it on his stomach, gave him the advantage. Flat on his stomach again under low-sweeping pines, he had a good view up and down the river. Now he could see two horses beyond the rocks where the dry-gulcher had been firing. They were down in a little depression on the edge of the river, a big bay and a Roman-nosed roan.

Neither of the men was in sight, but Carson caught a glimpse of the black-bearded man again. He was down behind a rock, not far above the point where the ravine mouth reached down to the water. His rifle ready, the black-bearded man was watching intently.

A moment later, the man upon Carson's left fired again, two quick shots at the ravine. Carson marked in his mind the spot where the smoke jerked from the bushes, and looked back at the man across the river. He was not more than two hundred yards away, within good shooting distance.

Carson looked back at the horses, then lifted his head to make certain that a gray rock hidden in the low trees beyond them was not another horse—which would have meant a third man somewhere about. At

that instant the man across the river opened fire on him.

A bullet whistled overhead, clipping a twig from a pine. Instantly there was another shot, then another, one behind the other with something akin to machine-gun rapidity. Carson dropped back, squirmed behind a rock, and fired.

His shot was close, too close for comfort. He saw the man across the river rise, leap, and zigzag toward another rock. He was within a yard of it when Carson caught him with a bullet. The slug seemed to tear the man off the ground, turn him in the air, and bring him flopping crazily down on his face. He rolled down a little slope, rifle left behind him, and was still.

Now Carson went after the man in the rocks. Two shots lifted the fellow, made him fool enough to get up and try to run. The third shot caught him. Like a man suddenly crouching the fellow went down, a huddled figure against the bole of a willow.

A minute passed. Carson's steel-blue eyes watched both men. Neither stirred a hand or a foot. A strange, peaceful quiet had come over the canyon, broken by the sudden neighing of the black horse that belonged the man who had been ambushed.

Eyes cold slits, lips a tight line, his face marked high on the left cheek with an old bullet burn, Carson stood up and walked back to the place where he had left his horse.

CHAPTER III
Painted Rock

He found his horse cropping grass as if nothing had happened. Swinging into the saddle, Carson returned his rifle to the boot, and rode first to the man he had shot across the river. The ambusher was lying with arms outflung on either side, the bearded mouth snarled open, set eyes glaring up at the sky.

Carson studied the upturned face. He had never seen the man before, but all the earmarks of a ruffian were there—the thick lips, the snags of tobacco-stained teeth, the lumpy, whiskey-red nose. In the dead man's holsters were six-shooters, each with a butt plentifully notched.

Carson rode on to the man against the tree, re-fording the river on a rocky shoal. The giant was still hunched down, as if hiding from something. In the point of his right shoulder was a red mark that told its own story. The bullet had struck a bone, glanced, and rooted upward under the right cheek, burying itself deep in the man's head.

"And thirty minutes ago you were living, hale and hearty from the looks of you," Carson told him. "Thirty minutes ago you could have gone right on living. Trying to murder people from ambush never pays, my friend."

He swung his horse away and rode on to the man in black—the man the killers had mistaken for himself. Carson's face had become terrible, now, utterly bloodless, the steel-blue eyes hard and staring. The closer he came to that man in the trail, the faster his heart beat.

Fifty feet away from the huddled figure it became a small iron foundry inside his chest. It beat, slammed and battered away, his temples throbbing. Finally, with one swift gouge of his rowels, he jumped his horse up alongside the prone figure. Carson threw himself out of his saddle.

He knelt beside the body, his lips trembling. His eyes blurred as he rolled the man over. For a full minute he could not speak as he stared down into the upturned, boyish face. Then a terrible cry tore from his lips.

It was living hell for a man to find his kid brother—one he had not seen in two years—like this. Lying still and white, his body riddled with bullets, a hard, set smile on his boyish face.

"Ben!" Carson said hoarsely. "Ben—kid . . ."

"Hello . . . Bud." The youth's filming eyes were staring up at Carson's face. The bloodless lips had barely moved. The voice was like a whisper "I . . . heard last . . night in a sheep . . . camp . . . that you were going . . . to Painted Rock. Thought . . . I'd come . . . see you. Somebody . . . shot me, Bud."

"I—I know." Dave Carson's voice was a hoarse sob. "I spotted you down the canyon. Tried to—to catch up. I fired a couple of shots. You didn't hear them, Ben."

"You . . . got . . . a cigarette . . . Bud?"

"Yes, sure, Ben."

But he could not roll it. His hands were all fingers and thumbs. He spilled the tobacco, he broke the paper.

"I—I got the two that got you, Ben," he said. "They thought you were—were the Carson coming to take the sheriff job."

"I heard the shooting . . . Bud. Something . . . told me . . my old Bud . . . was on the job. Take good care . . . of Midnight. He's a . . . good horse. I won the riding rig in Miles City . . . round-up time . . . two weeks ago."

"Here's the cigarette, Ben." A shapless, badly twisted butt of a thing was there between the forefinger and thumb of his trembling right hand. He broke three matches before he could light it. "It . . . maybe . . . will do for the . . . minute, Ben."

But Ben Carson was only looking at him, a thin, ghost-like smile on the bloodless lips. Even the youth's eyes seemed to be smiling. He was barely twenty, seven years younger than Dave Carson. Men had said they were as near alike as two peas in a pod. Dave Carson had always known better. His face was older, grimmer, marked by that ugly bullet burn picked up in a three-day battle with a gang of horse thieves down on the Powder River five years ago. He did not have Ben's ready smile. He did not have that happy-go-lucky youthful tint.

"You want it, Ben?"

He touched Ben Carson's lips with the cigarette. His hand flinched back. A hushed cry came from him, and he dropped the cigarette to the ground. A hard, dry lump had come jerking up into his throat, choking him. For a minute he could not get his breath. Then words came, quick, gasping, each one tearing the very soul out of his body.

"Ben! Ben!" he whispered.

But Ben Carson did not hear him for he was dead.

The sun was slipping down across the broken spurs of mighty mountains, a red eye weeping bloody tears, when Carson rode into Painted Rock. He had come up the canyon along the old river trail, a tall fig-

ure slumped in his saddle, a man with a face twisted into a mask of pain. He glanced neither to the right nor the left. He seemed unconscious of the curious crowds there in front of the saloons and gambling dives.

He rode straight on to the old jail building at the head of the street, stopped at the run-down hitch-rack. Wearily he slid out of his saddle. For a minute he stood, looking around. His hand moved over his face, brushing aimlessly. Then he turned to the three horses he had led into town behind him.

Strapped in the saddle of each of the three horses was a dead man.

CHAPTER IV
The Big Boss

The little, afternoon crowd in the Rocky Mountain Chalet seemed the most interested. The building was the largest in Painted Rock, sitting on the west side of the street on a thirty-foot cliff overlooking one of the deepest and most dangerous pools in the Horsethief River.

The bar on the first floor was twice as long as any other bar in town. The place boasted of twenty gambling tables, a hardwood strip of dance floor, and an orchestra. The Butte Kid, a thin, pinch-faced little man with sunken black eyes, played the piano. Reno Maude slammed the trombone, a cornet and a saxophone, and Old Pete Lark, a hatchet-faced sheepherder, sawed merry hell on a fiddle and took a fling at a banjo now and then.

It was a good establishment, well handled. A man could buy anything from a pint of "doctored" denatured alcohol for a measly fifty cents to a bottle of the best champagne for the neat sum of ten dollars —or fifteen if the girl had to sit out dances with the buyer.

Piggy McQuard knew his business; knew how to get it and how to hold it. Born in a dive on the Rio Grande fifty years before, he had grown up with such establishments. His name had come with him. He had always been fat, a six-foot man-mountain with no neck to speak of, and the massive belly and shoulders of a Buddha. His face was a shaved-hog face, round as a rising moon, hairless as an egg. The lips were wide and thick, the nose an enormous spout.

Men expected Piggy McQuard to roar like a bull-fiddle when he spoke. He fooled them; his voice was that of a woman, high and shrill. He liked foppish things, and he wore a brilliant red sash around his middle, a blazing green shirt with the collar cut low, and black corduroy trousers. Behind his back, women called him a sissy.

They were wrong there. He could hold a man in each hand and kick them both to death. He could drink the worst sot under the table, eat five pounds of beefsteak at a sitting, and wash it down with a gallon of beer. Those who knew said he weighed three hundred and fifty-four pounds, but no cat was ever faster on its feet.

Sitting in his immense swivel-chair in one of the Rocky Mountain Chalet's second floor rooms, he saw Painted Rock's new sheriff ride up the street. He saw Bullard's and Crumpshaw's bodies on the horses. He saw the body of the third man. His big, slate-gray eyes narrowed. The hairless head nodded ever so gently.

Something had gone wrong. That was all there was to it. There was nothing exciting to it, nothing to get a man worried. Frank and Sam were simply dead. In a little while he would know all about it. He turned to his humidor, selected a good, fat cigar, and lighted it with a hand as steady as a rock. Nothing ever excited McQuard. Only fools got excited. And Piggy McQuard was no fool.

He sat smoking calmly. In a minute he saw Judge Rexford Wingang come out

the swinging doors of the Talking Mule Bar across the street. At his heels trailed Ike Worth, the short, thick-stomached prosecuting attorney.

One rarely saw Wingang without pasty-faced Ike bobbing along at his heels. They made a striking pair. Wingang was well over six feet tall, about sixty-five, dark-faced and as lean as a skeleton. And, as if to make himself even more spectacular, he wore bushy sideburns puffed out from the side of his face like whiskers on a mountain goat.

At their heels followed others, hurriedly shuffling along, a curious and excited mob. The crowd was gathering rapidly in front of the old jail now. There would be much talk, a lot of speculation. McQuard's eyes twinkled, then grew hard. A quick, pistol-like volley of hoofs had sounded in the street. A man and a girl were galloping toward the jail.

The man was old, tall and lean-faced, his straggly gray mustache blowing. He rode a hammer-headed gray, a one-eyed old fool of a horse. The man's horsehide chaps were old and ragged, like the gray hat flopping on his head. In a worn holster at his right hip bobbed a black-butted Colt.

The girl was enough to attract any man's attention, especially one like Piggy McQuard who made a business of women—along with other things. She was almost as tall as her father. Long, golden hair hung down her back. She was dressed cowgirl fashion, riding a wiry yellow mare—about the only good thing in the shape of a horse left to old Jess Slade's Boxed Kite. A .32/20 repeating rifle hung at her saddle horn.

They passed out of sight, the dust flicking up in little clouds at the heels of their mounts. McQuard blew a smoke ring toward the dark ceiling above his shining, hairless head, and nodded.

"Now there will be music," he smiled. "Old Jess and his adorable Rose! 'The Rose of Horsethief River Canyon!'" He chuckled. "They'll express their sympathy, probably ask the new duck to come live at their house, and try to make him welcome. Hum-mm!" He scratched his head. "Wonder who the third dead man was? Probably somebody Frank and Sam picked up."

He swung around from the window and picked up one of his ledgers from the old desk. In a minute he was busy with his

pen, adding up lines of figures. It took money to run an establishment like the Rocky Mountain Chalet.

It was about an hour later that he tossed down the pen and again looked out the window. The crowd up the street was scattering. Sid True, the big, bald-headed undertaker, had taken charge of the bodies of the three men. Judge Wingang and Ike Worth were coming back down the street, heading for the Talking Mule Bar.

McQuard watched them disappear through the swinging doors. In his mind he saw them walking on into the little back room. He saw them go in and close the door, and then he saw them doing something less than a dozen men in Painted Rock knew they could do.

They were coming diagonally across the street, or, rather, under the street, following an old mine tunnel that led to a locked room in the basement of the Rocky Mountain Chalet. A closet door opened in McQuard's room within a minute of the time he expected it to open. Judge Wingang and Worth stepped noiselessly into the room.

"Frank and Sam were dusted out of the picture." Wingang spoke in a whisper, helping himself to a cigar as he sat down. "The third man was our new sheriff's kid brother. Frank and Sam made a mistake. The kid was ahead of the sheriff, it seems, and they cut him down. Then the sheriff, himself, rides into the picture. There's a short fight; Sam and Frank are dusted out of the picture. That sheriff must be all we've heard."

"And more!" put in Worth. "One of the slickest gunmen that ever hit these parts, Piggy."

"He's still not slick enough for this town!" McQuard lighted another cigar. "What did Old Jess Slade and his pretty Rose have to say about it? Sympathetic, I suppose."

"More than that." Wingang cleared his throat. "It seems they were down the canyon rim looking for their last herd of yearlings. They saw Frank and Sam below them, saw the shooting of the young punk, then saw the sheriff, himself, open up on the party."

"They told that?" McQuard's eyes narrowed.

"Old Jess did. The girl jerked his arm a time or two to keep him quiet, but the old devil talked anyway. You know him; mean as hell when he starts. Smart, too. Hates the guts of every damned one of us. He's one man we can't fool, Piggy."

"Oh, sure!" McQuard leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head. "But get this: Everything's going to be quiet for a day or two. Pass that word on the other side of the street. I'll attend to this side. Give our new bird all the sympathy you can think up. Let's get the funeral over. I never liked 'em. And let's buy this new sheriff drinks. Let's slap him on the back and tell him how sorry we are."

"Old Jess has done asked 'im to his house to stay."

"Naturally!" McQuard nodded, then rocked back to the old desk. "I knew that when I saw Old Jess and the girl pass. It's just as well. Old Jess will probably become the new duck's deputy—"

"They say he never uses one!" cut in Worth. "Only a jailer; somebody to do the feeding and the turning of the keys while he goes out and throws them in."

"We've had men in Painted Rock like him. They didn't last." McQuard took three or four quick puffs at his cigar. "Do as I say. Stay away from here as much as possible. Slip the word to the sheriff that I'm the fly in the honey. Let him concentrate on the Rocky Mountain Chalet—just as the others have done. We might even pull a little something spectacular. Whatever we do, there'll be another sheriff wanted in Painted Rock before Sunday night. That's final. Stuff your damned pockets with those cigars now, and get out. I might have a caller at any moment.

"Him?" Worth jerked his thumb toward the old jail.

"Yes, *him!*" McQuard's lips tightened on his cigar. "If all reports are true, he'll make the rounds to pay his respects. I'll treat him like a long-lost brother. You birds on the other side can tell him that I'm sweating poison from every pore when I slap a man on the back and smile at him."

"You take the damnedest chances, Piggy!"

"Sure! That's why nobody ever pins anything on me!"

"And Old Jess?" Worth had stood up. "Are you going to just keep letting the old devil slide?"

"I am not!" McQuard's big hands closed into fists. "He'll be the next dead man we'll present to this new and mighty sheriff, and within thirty days his pretty girl will be working for me—like a lot of other pretty heifers in these parts whose people opposed me inthe past. That's a

promise. And I keep promises, in case you have forgotten."

CHAPTER V
First Blood

Painted Rock remained quiet until Thursday afternoon. Keeping his face as sober as a deacon's, Piggy McQuard attended the funeral on Tuesday. The sheriff's brother was buried first, up on the tall knoll north of the jail. The bodies of Frank Crumpshaw and Sam Bullard were buried two hours later. All Painted Rock turned out. Even groups of cowboys dashing into town for a spree were quieted at once. To all outward appearances Painted Rock was a peaceful town.

Wednesday morning found Sheriff Dave Carson busy. A man dropping in for a drink, brought Piggy McQuard the news. The jail, he knew, was a sorry excuse for a jail. He knew as well as anybody in town that chickens roosted in one of the cells, that all the steel was rusty. One of the doors had been torn from its hinges. Another hung by one rusty hinge. Out on the desk a black, gummy smear spread across the ragged old blotter. It was the blood left by Old Pat Berry, the sheriff who had been found dead with a knife between his shoulder blades.

The hammering of Painted Rocks' two blacksmiths told the whole town that repairs were being made. And right on the heels of the carpenters came three men with paint brushes.

"Yuh wouldn't know the joint now," reported a long, hook-nosed man by the name of Jake Cool who came into the Rocky Mountain Chalet at noon Thursday. "All repaired, clean as a whistle, and the steel painted. I reckon the new duck aims to have customers right away soon."

"Looks like it," agreed McQuard.

"The Slades have took 'im in like a brother, too."

"So I heard. Must be nice."

Piggy was sitting at a table in the southwest corner of the big barroom at four o'clock when Dave Carson walked in. The fat man kept his head down, his hands busy with a deck of cards, but he saw Carson stop at the head of the bar and say something to Fatty Smith, the bartender. Fatty jerked his thumb toward McQuard, and Carson came on down the room. There was something cat-like in his walk, something that McQuard did not like in his face.

"You're McQuard?" Carson stopped just on the other side of the table.

"Right, Carson!" McQuard stood up, thrusting out his hand. "Shake. Glad you dropped in. Have a drink?"

"No, thanks." Carson ignored the outstretched hand. "I'm just making my rounds. I'd like to take a look at your gambling layout back there." He nodded toward a partition with a heavy-wired door at the rear of the room. "Don't suppose you'll mind?"

"Unusual, ain't it?" McQuard's eyes narrowed. "What do you figure on doing, closing it up?"

"No, to both your questions." Carson was looking him straight into the eyes. "I usually make an inspection of such places when I take a job in a town. If your layout is on the level and if you keep it like that, you'll have no quarrel with me."

"Want to inspect the women, too?"

"Hardly. I'm a Westerner, McQuard. I know there's no use trying to stop a girl from dancing in a dump like this if she sets her mind to it."

"It's never been called a dump before, mister!"

"There's a first time for everything."

McQuard growled something, and followed Carson into the gambling room. There were no players. Saturday and Sunday were the big days. All others

were rather quiet, with only two or three games running at night.

Carson inspected the wheels, spun them, trying them. McQuard leaned against the wall, watching. There were three wheels. After a few minutes Carson seemed satisfied. He glanced up. For a moment he stared at McQuard's heavy-lidded eyes, then he spoke.

"The card cases now, McQuard."

"All cards in the cases are sealed, just

like they come from the people who make them, mister."

"But I take it that they can be opened, seals or no seals. I'll have a look, if you don't mind."

"And supposing, by God, that I do mind?" McQuard was losing hold on himself at last. "Supposing I just say that you can't?"

"Then I'll be governed by what I've found with your wheels and just throw the whole damned thing in the river."

"What's wrong with the wheels?"

"They're all three as crooked as hell, and you know it!" snapped Carson. "Why argue about them?"

He turned his back to McQuard and walked on to a small inner bar in the northwest corner of the room. It had a showcase at one end of it, filled with cigars and sealed decks of cards. Just as he stepped behind it McQuard caught him by the arm, whirling him around and throwing him against the wall.

"Hold on, smart fellow!" he snarled. "You might be a damned fast worker, but I was here a hell of a long time before you. You're not busting into my cards. I—"

A fist cut him off. It was like a driving maul swinging up with the speed of light. Flat on the wide, snarling mouth it caught him, lifted him off the floor, turned him in the air, and sprawled him on his back across a poker table.

With a roar the big man was up. No man could do this to him! No man had ever done it! McQuard rushed.

Dynamite struck him. A fist knocked aside his guard. Another fist whipped through, caught him on the point of the chin. There was another, and another. He was being carried backward, his heavy arms like lead. A swift right hook caught him on the jaw. He was down, flat on his face, and the room going black.

Fatty Smith was bending over Piggy when he came to. His face and the bosom of his shirt was icy-cold. The bartender held another pail of water ready. In a daze, Piggy sat up, rubbing a fat hand across his eyes. The first thing he noticed was that the poker table in front of him was missing. Then he saw that other tables and chairs were missing.

A little crowd gathered. McQuard looked from face to face. He saw now that the roulette wheels were gone. He turned his head and looked at the little bar in the corner. The showcase full of cards was gone!

"Take it easy, Piggy!" Smith was trying to dab a cold rag on his face. "Man, I thought you were never coming out of it! I've been working on you for twenty minutes!"

"What happened? Where'd he go, damn 'im?"

"Across the street. They say he's knockin' hell out of the Talkin' Mule right now. Smashin' their stuff with an axe. There ain't no river so handy over there."

"An axe? A river?" He glowered up at

Smith. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"Can't you see?" Smith waved his hands. "He threw all our gamblin' truck off the back balcony, right into that deep hole in the river. He cleaned out the joint, Piggy."

"I'll kill 'im!" shouted McQuard, lurching to his feet.

"Use your head!" Smith pleaded, catching him by the shoulders. "Gawd A'mighty, man, you ain't fit to fight nobody right now. You've got four front teeth knocked out, and I think your jaw's busted."

"Get out of my way!" Piggy snarled.

He hurled Smith away. The little crowd in front of him parted quickly. He walked unsteadily, and passed behind the bar. From a shelf he caught up two heavy, long-barreled six-shooters. He half-cocked them, spun their cylinders, and shoved the weapons into his sash.

Banging through the swinging door he halted on the old board walk. A streak of blood seeped from each corner of his mouth. Across the street the crowd in front of the Talking Mule parted. Dave Carson was just coming out the front door.

"Carson!" McQuard's voice rang out like a crash. He scarcely recognized it as his own. "By God, mister, it's you or me!"

He shambled diagonally across the street, a mad bull going to an attack. A second later he stood in front of Carson. The crowd had melted away, some of them darting inside the Talking Mule to get out of the way of expected bullets. McQuard halted, bracing himself. Carson was standing wide-legged, waiting for him.

"Now, damn you!" yelled McQuard. *Draw!*"

His big hands shot to the butts of the guns in his sash. They closed solidly, swiftly—and halted. His eyes widened. The muzzles of two heavy .45's in Dave Carson's hands were pointing at the pit of his huge stomach. Carson was speaking.

"Where do you want them? In that fat head or in your barrel of lousy guts, Piggy McQuard? I'm damned accommodating at times."

McQuard did not move. He didn't even dare remove his hands from the butts of his guns. His eyes had simply widened, as if a fog had been lifted from his brain. He glanced at the scattered-out crowd, at this face and that. Two men had actually lifted their hands. Somebody spoke then; a low, warning voice.

"Easy, Piggy! He's got the drop on yuh."

CHAPTER VI
Jailbirds Three

Commonsense flickered behind McQuard's heavy-lidded, hard eyes. Dave Carson saw that. He saw the wide lips grow slack in the hog face. He watched those little eyes send another searching glance to the right and left.

"Coming out to get a man yourself isn't like you, Piggy," Carson taunted. "You'd better listen to what your hired man is telling you."

"You—you wrecked my place!" howled McQuard.

"And I am going to wreck it again, Piggy. Gambling stops in Painted Rock unless it's on the square . . . Take your hands off those guns!"

McQuard's hands moved, slipped, then lifted. He stared into Carson's face. Carson stared straight back into his eyes and laughed!

"I'll be damned!" whispered a voice. "He's stopped Piggy dead in his tracks!"

"Piggy ain't got no show!" another voice rasped.

The rasp was enough to warn Carson. He took a few quick steps backward and placed his back to the wall of the Talking Mule.

McQuard glanced to the right and left, and then turned. Like a man who did not know exactly what to do with himself, he stumbled back across the street. At the front doors of the Rocky Mountain Chalet he halted, looked back. Carson was still watching. He pushed his heavy bulk through the swinging doors, and was gone.

"Look out for a rifle now, Dave," warned a voice to Carson's left. "I'm sorter keepin' an eye on the rest of the bunch."

It was Old Jess Slade. The words were scarcely out of his mouth before the street was ringing with the report of a shot that came from one of the upper windows of the Rocky Mountain Chalet. Slade groaned, staggered to one side, and plunged face forward to the boardwalk in front of the Talking Mule.

Carson darted across the street like something bouncing over the ground. Guns ready, he banged through the swinging doors and jerked to a halt. Piggy McQuard was leaning on the bar between two men. It could not have been he who had fired the shot! Carson darted on for the rustic stairway.

He thought he knew the window, thought he could go straight to the room from whence the shot had been fired. He kicked open a door, and found an empty room. He kicked open other doors. Two women were in this one, both sitting up in bed and combing their hair. Neither of them had fired the shot, he knew.

It was the same with the other rooms—women and girls asleep. At last he hurried up a stairway to the attic rooms. In one of them he found a little, warty-faced man lying asleep on an old mattress on the floor. The door had been open. Carson's entrance had not awakened him.

Carson eased forward, stooped, gently taking hold of the man's left wrist with his right forefinger and thumb. He had found the little man's pulse, squatted there, counting. The pulse was slow and regular, not disturbed in the least.

That eliminated the man. At the same time, it left Carson hopeless. He made another round of the rooms, jerking open closets. There was not another man upstairs. There was no sign of a rifle. He plunged back downstairs. At the foot of the steps he came to a halt.

"How many men," he demanded, "have rooms upstairs?"

"Nobody 'cept Mr. McQuard, myse'f, an'—an' Club-Foot Johnny, the clean-up man," stammered the bartender. "Johnny sleeps in one of the top rooms."

"Who fired that shot from a window up there?" Carson knew it was a foolish question, even as it jerked from his lips.

"I didn't know there was a shot!" sneered McQuard.

"You're a damned liar!" Carson leaped across the room. A six-shooter flipped from his right holster and into his hand. He jammed it forward, pressing the muzzle into McQuard's fat-cushioned ribs.

"It came out of your place, Piggy. I'm holding you responsible. You come along with me. If any of your would-be gunfighters take the notion to shoot me in the back, I'll pour you full of lead as I'm going down. *March!*"

"Why whatnahell—" Piggy began.

"*Move!*" roared Carson, catching him by the shoulders and giving him a shove toward the swinging doors. "I'm locking you up!"

He knew he was courting a bullet in his back. At any instant he expected it, but he marched McQuard out the door and turned him up the street.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw that a little group of cowboys were carrying the limp form of Old Jess Slade up the street to the doctor's office.

"You can't do this to me!" Piggy McQuard was foaming at the mouth. "You're

Rose was fighting valiantly by his side. As one of the outlaws came into view, she downed him as quickly as any man could have done.

signing your own death warrant, you damned fool!"

"Maybe I signed it when I came here! Keep shuffling. Or do you want your henchmen to see me stomp the living hell out of you?"

"Damn you, Carson, I'll—"

"Shut up!"

In grim silence they reached the jail, and there, in the old office, was a surprise for Carson. Judge Rexford Wingang was leaning against the desk. The short, dumpy figure of the prosecuting attorney was squashed into the big chair behind the desk. He jerked to his feet, as Carson and McQuard entered.

"Now—now, what is this?" stammered Wingang. "What—what are you about to do, Sheriff Carson?"

"You'll find out soon enough!" snapped Carson. "Here, you!" He jerked McQuard around, tore two heavy six-shooters from their holsters, dropping them to the floor. He then tore a smaller revolver from the red sash. After it came a knife.

"All right. March—and look out for the paint; those cells aren't dry back there yet."

Carson prodded McQuard with his gun down the corridor, into a cell, and slammed the door behind him. He clicked the key in the lock, and strode back into the office of the jail. Snatching up McQuard's weapons, he tossed them into a drawer of the desk. When he looked up Wingang and Worth were staring at him with their mouths wide open. Wingang was the first to find his voice.

"Now look here, Carson!" His voice was almost a shriek. "I'm the judge of this district. Mr. Worth is the—the—"

"Shyster lawyer. I know about Mr. Worth, too," cut in Carson. "What in hell were you wanting to say about it?"

"What—what's that man being locked up for?" Worth stammered. "I have the right to know. I—"

"Yes, maybe so!" Carson's long right arm shot out. His hand closed on Worth's shoulder. "What have you got on you in shape of fighting tools?"

"Say, what—what the hell's the matter with you?" Worth bellowed, pop-eyed.

"I'm locking you up, too!"

"You can't do that!" yelled Wingang. "I'll issue a writ—"

"Issue a dozen of them!" barked Carson. "But shut up until your turn comes, you old buzzard!"

The jail office was a mad house now. Worth tried to fight. A fist cracked like an exploding shotgun on the side of his jaw. He went down. A moment later he was caught by the back of the collar, scooted down the corridor and hurled into a cell.

"Man, you've gone mad!" Wingang yelled as he followed Carson into the corridor. "Just because you were appointed by the governor and sent in here to bulldoze a peaceful, law-abiding little town—"

"Thanks for coming in!" Carson was upon him like a flash. "Saves me the trouble of dragging you here."

"What—what are you doing?" wailed the judge.

"Don't be dumb!" snapped Carson, running his hands over the man. "That's all the others could howl! What's this, something to plug your teeth with?" He jerked a small revolver from Wingang's hip pocket. A heavier six-shooter followed it. "Bad fellows. You shouldn't be packing weapons. You might get shot!"

A crowd had gathered outside. Somebody laughed. Somebody else cursed. McQuard was already talking to someone through the cell window. With Wingang howling at the top of his lungs, Carson threw him into the cell with Worth.

"Watch out for the paint!" he barked.

"I'll issue a writ—a writ—" the judge sputtered.

Carson slammed the corridor door, drowning out his yammering.

CHAPTER VII
McQuard Strikes Back

There were twenty-odd characters in Painted Rock a man could rate as actually and deadly dangerous. Dave Carson knew it. He had known it before he came to Painted Rock. They were hangers-on and human wolves, every one wanted somewhere.

Old Jess Slade had told him all he could, had named this one and that one. Jess Slade had seen them all come to Painted Rock. And he had seen his cattle and horses vanish into thin air. Fewer and fewer riders galloped the rangelands of his Boxed Kite, until at last he had been reduced to less than three thousand dollars in the bank and a rangeland barren of cattle and horses. And now Jess Slade was shot.

Carson had wanted to do something for the man, but there had been no time. He

had tried to get the man who shot him, and the man had given him the slip. Somehow that man had done it without coming downstairs in the Rocky Mountain Chalet. There had not been enough time for a man to get downstairs. But with Piggy McQuard, Judge Wingang, and bottle-bellied, pasty-faced Ike Worth safe in jail, things might take on a new slant.

Carson left them cursing and howling in their cells like enraged apes. With the heavy jail keys in his hand, he closed the front door to the office and stood for a moment on the short, lean-to porch. Then he walked down the steps, past the old hitch-rack, and out to a bored well in the corner of the jailyard. He took two keys from the heavy string he was carrying and held them up for the crowd to see.

"This old well is nearly three hundred feet deep." His voice was just high enough to carry over the crowd. "They tell me there's a length of broken pipe in the bottom of it. Now look. These two keys are to the cells where I have locked up McQuard, the judge, and Ike Worth. Later I'll tell you why I've locked them up. Right now you can observe something you've probably heard about but never seen. Here go the only keys in Painted Rock that will free my prisoners from their cells."

With that he dropped the keys into the old well and heard them go rattling down the rusty iron pipe. A gasp came from somebody in the crowd. A man swore, and another laughed nervously.

"I've hearn of sheriffs lockin' a man up an' throwin' the keys away," chuckled a cowboy from one of the rangelands up the canyon, "but damn if this ain't the first time I ever saw it."

Carson left them abruptly. He had not lied. Those keys in that well were the only keys to the cells his three prisoners were locked in. Only sledge hammers, chisels, crow-bars and blow torches would open those doors, and any such hammering and battering would arouse the whole town. It simply meant there would be no jail delivery.

He crossed the street and entered the doctor's office. Dr. Bund was a little, short man, thoroughly bald, pinch-faced. Some "lunger" from the East, Carson had decided. In the back room of the office he was at work over the prone figure of Slade. A few men stood about, waiting. Slade had regained consciousness. The hard old lips with their ungainly mustaches cracked open with a smile when he saw Carson.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Slade." Carson took him by the hand. "I hope you didn't think I deliberately ran off from you."

"Shore, yuh didn't!" The cattleman's voice was strong. "I got hit an' just sorter wilted down, Dave. Not much damage. The doctor says I've got a piece of my collar bone whacked off. It deadened me all over, but I'm comin' out of 'er fine now. I hope somebody doesn't go an' scare my Rose to death."

It was almost a prophecy. Twenty minutes later, with a few more of Slade's friends venturing into the rooms, it happened. There was a wild yell in the street. Somebody swore loudly, and then came the furious clattering of hoofs beating down the street.

Carson was out of the door in a second. He stopped short, reached for his guns. In the saddle of his horse, which he had left hitched in front was a wiry little man with a black beard. And in the man's arms, her hands tied behind her, was Rose Slade. The horse shot away down the street. Carson reholstered his guns. He couldn't chance hitting the girl.

With his shoulder in a bandage, the bundle of gauze reaching even to his neck, Jess Slade had rushed to the door in spite of Dr. Bund's protests. Carson whirled.

"It's a ruse!" he barked to old Jess. "To get me out of town so they can release those men. Go to the jail. Rip those guns

out of the gun locker. Close the shutters of the windows. Take what men you can trust. Hold that jail. I'll be back."

He was gone then, leaping across the walk to a hitch-rack and throwing himself into the saddle of the nearest horse at hand. It happened to be a good horse, a tall, racy-looking chestnut sorrel. An old rifle hung on the saddle. Carson swung it across his knees, whirled the horse, and slammed home his rowels. With a wild snort and a buck-jumping leap the horse thundered down the street.

Somebody shot at him from an upper window of the Rocky Mountain Chalet. Carson sent an answering bullet crashing through the window, and felt the wind of a slug from a gun in the doorway of the Talking Mule. Carson fired twice at the man in the doorway before vanishing behind a clump of jackpines at the foot of the street.

It was hell-for-leather now. Ben's horse was traveling like a flying black streak wind-whipped along the ground. Carson studied the animal. He was about seven hundred yards in the lead. If he only kept his feet in this wild race everything would be well.

A sudden fall would be the girl's only danger. Carson was certain of that. He was certain, also, that that man in the lead would release her in due time. Without a doubt it had been in the plot that she would scream, and the girl had fooled them. To attract attention the man himself had been forced to yell.

A mile shot by, and another. Carson was gaining. Off to his left he caught a glimpse of three other riders. They were trying to keep out of sight. Then he saw three more riders thundering along west of the river.

This was soon going to settle down to a fight, Carson knew. The man with the girl was less than five hundred yards ahead. He was bearing gradually to the right, swinging in closer to the river. Suddenly he ducked out of sight in a bowl-shaped depression in the bank of the river. It was a place studded with pines and rocks higher than a man on horseback—an ideal spot for a man to suddenly turn and put up a fight.

The fight was on a few seconds later. The men to the right and left opened fire. Carson's horse stumbled, bawled, and went down from a heavy slug of lead that tore through him just behind the right shoulder. With a leap Carson was clear, fell, rolled over, bobbed back to pick up the old rifle. He flipped out of sight over the bank of the river a second later, just as the man hidden down in the rocks and trees opened fire on him.

CHAPTER VIII
Into the River

It was a nice little mess. Carson could not shoot into the rocks and trees below him because of Rose Slade, and over on the west bank of the river the three men who had downed his horse were closing in.

He kept out of sight for a half-minute, then popped up with the old rifle to his shoulder. The weapon roared. A horseman dashing toward a little knoll a hundred yards beyond the river suddenly buckled backward in his saddle. His horse pitched. The man went rolling off the animal's rump. He got up, took three paces, and went down again.

"One down, six more to go!" Carson laughed bitterly.

He slipped and almost fell into the swift water just below him. The slip saved him from a bullet that splattered against the rocks above him. The two men west of the river had gained the shelter of the knoll and had all the advantage now. They could see him, but he could not see them.

A second bullet sang close, slapped the rocks with a vicious *plan-n-g!* and whined upward in its dying flight. Another fol-

lowed, then another, both so close he could all but feel them raking against his body.

There was only one thing to do—get the hell out of here! But he could not go back, up and over those rocks. He could not go forward. To turn up the river would expose him even more to the gunmen on the knoll. If he moved downstream he would have to round that jutting spur of rock thrust out in the snarling water to his left. That would bring him face-to-face with the gunman hiding in the rocks and trees—the one who held Rose Slade captive.

He did the only thing he could do when another bullet screamed past, missing him by a bare six inches. Gripping the old rifle tightly, he plunged head-first into the dangerous water at his feet.

As he shot forward he heard a yell from the knoll. It was a yell of victory. One of the men on the knoll was certain that he had scored a hit as they saw Carson plunge into the roar of that eternally cold water.

Its iciness drove pain to the very marrow of his bones, but he kept below the surface, the water shooting him along with the speed of a race horse. He kept going until he thought his lungs were going to burst for air, then he bobbed up, gasping for breath. He bobbed up twice more before he was thrown roughly against the east bank of the stream. He saw that he had landed below Rose Slade and her captor, and that was what he wanted.

Worming upward from the stream, screened by low-hanging willow bushes and rocks, Carson shook the water from his eyes and ears, and cradled the dripping rifle in the crook of his right arm. Shouting was going on now on both sides of the river. He heard the bellow of a bull-like voice, and realized that a man was rushing down from the knoll.

"I tell yuh, I got 'im! Hell, I saw my bullet knock 'im right off his pins!" the voice said.

"Look out, yuh fool!" came a voice from the east bank of the river, its owner hidden somewhere in the rocks. "Yuh know what Sam an' Frank got!"

The furious beat of hoofs followed, going downstream above him on both sides of the river. That meant they were looking

for him. Carson slipped on, taking advantage of his shelter.

"There goes his hat!" barked a voice below him a short time later. "See it, Hank? See?"

"Shore, I see, but where'n hell's he at?"

Carson moved on. He could hear Rose Slade's arguing voice above him, but he could not catch her words. He heard a man speak gruffly to the girl. In a minute he was able to see her. She stood with her back to a tree, tied there with a rope. The man was about a yard beyond her, a rifle in his hands. Carson gained the shelter of rock a dozen feet away before the other saw him.

"Naw, yuh don't!" the fellow snarled, leaping behind the girl for protection. His rifle jerked forward over the girl's shoulder. "Yo're my meat, damn—Oh!"

Rose Slade had lifted one of her booted feet and kicked the man on the shin. The tall, spiked heel had landed squarely. It swerved him to one side. For a second he was a foot away from the girl. He tried to get back to her, but she caught him with another kick that dropped him to his knee. While he was down she landed a third kick on the side of his face. He yelled as he fell on his side and came up with a lurch.

"I'll cut yore damned purty throat for this, yuh wild mare hellion!" he yelled.

It was the last thing he ever said. Carson's eye behind the old rifle's sights had become a narrow streak of harsh light. His finger curled on the trigger. There was a gash of fire, a ripping explosion. The black-bearded man turned on his heel, blood staining his forehead as he fell.

An instant later Painted Rock's new sheriff was untying Rose Slade's bonds.

CHAPTER IX
Quitters!

Back in Painted Rock red hell was on the wing, and Piggy McQuard chuckled in his cell. It was the chuckle of a man well satisfied.

A few instructions whispered through the bars of his cell window had done it. The abduction of Rose Slade had been the opening stroke. Carson had followed, as Piggy McQuard knew he would. Everyone else had stood gaping until Old Jess Slade started bellowing like a dying bull for help to take over the jail and hold it.

Carson was gone for good, Piggy was confident. The moment he had disappeared down the canyon, a man on the roof of the Rocky Mountain Chalet had passed the signal to the riders who were to follow the sheriff and blast him out.

Backed by four men he had almost forced to accompany him at the point of a gun, Old Jess Slade had taken over the jail. It would be the last thing the old devil would shove himself in on, Piggy thought angrily. Right now he was catching it out there in the jail office, for Painted Rock had become a gun-blazing hell.

Eight men, having come under the street by way of the old tunnel, were lying flat on their stomachs on the top balcony in front of the Rocky Mountain Chalet. Steadily, taking their time about it, they were pouring a blazing fire into the jail, hammering it with bullets. Other places along the street had joined them.

And McQuard, Wingang, and Worth were safe. Perfectly safe. There were two solid walls of three-ply, cold-rolled steel between them and the office. No bullet would cut through those walls.

One of old Jess' men was already down, caught in that hissing, raking stream of lead slapping through the old front wall. Another was limping and bobbing about, still trying to fight. Old Jess was cursing steadily, hunched down behind the desk and blazing away through a crack in the wall. He had killed a man on the balcony of the Rocky Mountain Chalet. He had downed another with a bullet through the hip on a roof across the street.

But they couldn't hold it much longer. The odds were too great.

They were even greater when another man suddenly grunted and staggered back against the wall, his rifle clattering on the floor. Old Jess saw him spit out a mouthful of blood and go to his knees.

"Don't give up!" he pleaded. "Not as long as there's a speck of blood left in yuh, Charley. It's our day to rid this town of that dirty mob. We ain't had nothin' but rustlin', robbin' an' behind-the-back murderin' since they got their set-in. Stick it out an' we'll win."

But the man was already through. Old Jess dragged him back behind the desk with the other who had been killed. He was dead when Old Jess laid him down, and a whimper came from one of the two who were left.

"We ain't got a chance, Jess! We're damned fools. We've got to lay down or we'll all die right here."

"Yuh go to hell!" roared the older man.

"He's right, Jess!" the other man yelled frantically. "By Gawd, he's right. Look! There's enough lead pourin'— Ah-oo-oo!" His voice trailed off into a long wail. "I'm hit! I'm killed! Ah-oo-oo!"

He was down on the floor, rolling and twisting, his yells and cries filling the jail.

Piggy McQuard had heard it all. In safety he roared with laughter.

"You always wanted to get your nose into something!" he barked through the bars of his cell door to Jess Slade. "I hope you're getting your damned old belly filled at last!"

And his voice trailed off with a roaring splatter of laughter. It came time after time, and time after time the coward on the floor wailed.

"Ah-oo-oo! I'm a-dyin', Jess! Ah-oo-oo!"

"Die an' go to hell!" snarled Old Jess. "There ain't nothin' wrong with yuh yet but a busted leg. If you've got any guts you'll keep up the fight. Shorely to Gawd somebody'll join in on our side before long. There's plenty of decent folks left in Painted Rock."

"There's a key up in the old clock," whimpered the first man who had complained. "Pat Berry showed it to me once. It'll open the corridor door an' let us sneak out back."

"To hell with that key!" Old Jess was firing his gun again. He saw another man whirl, drop a rifle, and go rolling down a roof. "We ain't licked yet," he said.

The old clock on the wall seemed to answer him. A slug struck almost in the center of its yellowed dial. There was a wild noise of wheels and springs unwinding. The clock started striking. It struck furiously, a constant *ding-ding-ding-ding-ing* until a second bullet struck it. It struck the floor, bounced, and the lid flew open. A rusty key fell out of it.

"Here it is!" wailed one of the men. "Just like Heaven sent it to us. It's our chance, Jess! It's our only chance!"

"Ah-oo-oo!" wailed the man on the floor. "Ah-oo-oo!"

"Gawd A'mighty!" snarled Old Jess. "Why didn't your mammies cut yore damned throats when yuh was born? Never in my life have I seen such gutless tripe."

"That's right, Jess!" Piggy McQuard's old-woman voice was shrieking again. "They're gutless, all right, but they have a little sense. If they had more they'd bat you over the head and call it quits."

"Go to hell, damn yore hawg-fat soul!"

"Sure, I'll meet you there. And I'll bring that pretty girl of yours along with me. She'll look nice in my place yet. Do you get that? I said she'd look nice. Nice in my place! Nice getting the drunks to buy drinks for her. Nice! Damned nice! Understand me?"

Then he heard somebody grunt. A man swore. A key rattled. One of the defenders of the jail appeared in the corridor, dragging old Jess and the wounded man.

"I ain't fool enough to stay and get killed," the man was whimpering. "Bet I'm doin' more for them right now than they'd either one do for me."

He passed on down the corridor. Piggy McQuard heard him opening the rear door. In a minute he had gone grumbling away toward the old stables in the rear of the jail.

Piggy McQuard sat down flat on the floor, and screamed with laughter.

CHAPTER X
Lead Makes Law

Dave Carson expected to see Rose Slade faint when he cut the ropes at her wrists and freed her from the tree. Instead she leaped forward and snatched up the rifle at the dead man's feet. A minute later she was a fighting she-cat.

Hidden in the rocks and trees, they held the advantage now. They heard the men above them returning. A horse was galloping up on the other side of the river. As he flashed into sight for just an instant, the girl downed the rider, downed him as quickly as Carson himself could have done.

Then they were fighting the attackers up above them. The battle was short and

fierce. A man yelled. A horse snorted and went down. The others galloped on, a rider cursing. In another minute quiet had settled on the river bank.

"They couldn't face the music!" cried the girl. "They've gone back for help. Now's our chance to get out of here."

Carson tried to hold her, but she was like a war-drunken Indian full of the blood of victory. She leaped into the saddle on Ben's horse. Slinging her rifle above her head, she rode out of the little depression. For a minute Carson thought she was mad as she pulled rein up above him and sat there with the rifle brandished above her head and the wind bannering her long, golden hair in the dying sunlight.

"Let's go! Let's go!" she cried. "I know what they're going to do in Painted Rock. They told me!"

She caught his hand, and he swung up beside her. Ben's horse started to pitch. She slammed him with her rowels, jerked his head up, raked him down across the shoulder, and then they were bounding away toward Painted Rock.

"For years they've had everything their own way!" she cried. "Thank God, Dave Carson, you're a fighting man!"

No sounds of shots greeted them as they neared the town, but they heard a booming and banging. It was the noise of heavy hammers beating on ringing steel.

"They've killed dad!" The girl's voice was a sob. "It's certain now from what you have said. Listen!"

She drew rein suddenly, snatching the sweat-dripping horse to a halt. The ringing sounds of hammers on steel were clearer now.

"They're tearing the jail down!" She steeled the horse to move on. "But—but we'll fight them, Dave. We'll stand, won't we? We won't weaken—"

"Now you listen to me." He shook her. "Keep out of this thing. Do you hear? They won't stop at shooting you. I know this gang. I know lots more about it than I've told you and your father. There's been an investigator in here from the governor's office for months. I didn't just come bursting in like a fool. I knew a lot before I got here. Keep out of this thing. I have enough murder, robbery and rustling charges against the gang to make them do anything under the sun."

But he couldn't do a thing with her. He even pulled her off the horse in the clump of pines south of the foot of the street, but she was not a girl to be denied her way. She fought him like a tigress.

"You beat anything I ever saw!" he roared at her. "Hell, I thought you were one of those little mousey quiet women. You've gone crazy, Rose."

She darted away from him, still carrying that rifle. Carson followed her. She dodged him in an old blacksmith shop at the foot of the street. There was no more time to keep after her then. One look up the street had shown him everything. Piggy McQuard's huge figure was drawing itself out a window in the jail where the bars had been hammered and ripped away.

And then the fight was on. Carson wasted no more time.

Drawing his six-shooters he hurried forward, keeping in the shelter of the houses and stores on the west side of the street. He crouched once in a doorway as bullets from the mob at the jail tore splinters from the old walk all around him. As he crouched an old-fashioned buffalo rifle roared over his head, and almost knocked him down.

It was an old, old woman there in the gathering darkness of the doorway. Her toothless mouth was a twisted, gash-like pocket, her old eyes as fierce as a tiger's in their sunken sockets. She spoke with a high, cackling voice as she recognized him.

"They ain't got no guts, this town ain't, Sheriff Carson! I fit Indians with this old gun crossin' the country in a durned old covered wagon. I laid belly to the fire with my man, an' fit them Indians like hell!"

But all Painted Rock seemed to be joining it at last. Hot firing broke out in every direction. Two men tumbled off the old jail porch. The others scrambled wildly to regain the shelter of the jail. Old Jess Slade appeared from somewhere, his head in a bloody rag.

Carson moved on, from doorway to doorway. He saw McQuard just after he had passed the closed front doors of the Rocky Mountain Chalet. Piggy had picked up a couple of six-shooters somewhere. He was fighting his way from door to door, a snarling gorilla lurching and ducking along. He came face to face with Carson, and roared out a string of curses.

"You damned cheap snake!" he screamed. "I've got it even with you now. I've got guns in my hands and you're trying to load. It's my turn now. I—"

A bullet cut him off. The half-loaded six-shooter in Carson's hands flipped forward. There was a roar, a flash of flame. Both of McQuard's guns roared as Carson leaped aside. Like a falling bull, McQuard floundered down on the old walk. His eyes walled. He kicked twice and relaxed.

It was the turning point of a fight all Painted Rock seemed to have joined.

Not long afterwards a dirty white towel was flying on the end of a broomhandle from one of the windows of the jail. A howl of voices answered it. Long wails of terror lifted. The gunfighters were begging for their lives, making loud promises, and other white cloths were frantically shaken from the windows.

The round-up followed. Carson found himself surrounded with self-appointed deputies. Men told him where to find the passage between the Talking Mule and the Rocky Mountain Chalet; men who had been the pick of the town's bad-men an hour before became as weak as water.

Carson jammed the old jail full. He slammed them eight in a cell; they filled the corridor. Even the four old cells in the basement, never used before since the jail had been finished, were pressed into service. It took half the night. A few escaped in the darkness, but Painted Rock would never see them again and did not care.

At midnight, with more men to stand guard for him now than he could shake a stick at, Carson found himself leaning in a deserted doorway, worn and weary. It was there that Rose Slade found him. She came up and slipped her arms around him. She kissed him and then, without a word, did the foolish thing of pillowing her face against his chest and crying like a baby.

Happiness had made her one of those mousey-quiet girls again.

GUNSMOKE MONEY

By

MILES OVERHOLT

Billy leaped to one side and fired at the outlaw leader. The rider swayed in the saddle, then slid gently to the ground.

"Hawse," said Billy Laidlaw, as the tired pinto scented water and quickened its steps, "if you're as hongray as I am, the porehouse is just over the next hill."

A crystal stream bubbled up through the boulders there in the hillside, and the water was cold and as refreshing as nectar. Billy lay down and sipped at the bubbling spring as the horse drank out of the pool.

The puncher grunted, rolled back onto the grassy embankment and lazily rummaged for the makin's.

"Keep yore paws straight in front of yuh!" suddenly came a snarling voice from the shrubbery.

Billy sighed. "There's always somethin'," he mourned. "Alla time the dove of peace gets chased by a buzzard. What's eatin' you?"

A beetle-browed, swarthy man followed a gun muzzle into the open. "Lift yore flippers!" he ordered, snake eyes snapping.

Bill raised his hands, grinning ruefully.

"Lissen," he told the gunman, "if you're figgerin' to rob me, you shore come to the

When Billy Laidlaw Carried Out The Dying Stranger's Request In Regard To The Dinero In His Saddle Bags, He Headed Straight Into A Turbulent Drama Of Murder, Deception And Greed

wrong address. If sagehen aigs was sellin' for two cents a dozen, I couldn't chase a jaybird off its nest."

"Stand up!"

"Huh? Gosh, and I just got comfortable."

But the lean cowboy climbed to his feet, the beady eyes of the gun-hand following his every movement, lazy though they were.

"Turn 'round, an' keep your mitts high."

But instead of turning square around, Billy faced the pool.

"What's this all about?" the cowboy wanted to know. "Maybe it'd help if I knew."

"I'm takin' yore gun an' yore hawse," the fellow said, walking slowly toward the puncher whose eyes were glued to the pool which now reflected the gunman's movements.

"Where's yore hawse?" Billy asked, seeking to gain a little time and to disconcert the approaching man. "You fall off?"

"Badger hole. Broke a laig," the gunman answered. "I'm takin' yore pony."

He stepped on a tin can tossed away by a careless camper and nearly lost his balance. Cursing, he swung his gun on Billy and pressed the trigger.

But he was a trifle late. The puncher, watching his reflection in the pool, had seen him lose his stride and lower his gun muzzle for an instant. Then he whirled, shooting.

The slug took the gunman in the neck. A good shot, even though it was not aimed there. The slug from the other man clipped the leaves off a cottonwood at the side of the spring.

Billy watched the man thresh about for a moment, and ran over to kick the gun from his hand.

"You look plumb washed up to me," the cowboy said. "Got anything on yore so-called mind?"

The gunman was gasping, breathing his last few breaths.

"I—git—that dinero—in my—saddle pockets—to Katy. I—saddle—"

"I wouldn't have killed you, feller, if I'd had time to shoot where I wanted to," Billy apologized to the dead man, baring his head.

The dead gunman's saddle pockets were hanging in the crotch of an alder bush. Billy slung them across his saddle.

"Be just my luck to have the sheriff and the coroner and mebbe the district attorney come along about now to hold a picnic here," the cowboy said to himself.

He gazed about him at the solid rock formation.

"I ought to bury this gent before—uh—post mortem sets in," he grinned at his poor joke. "On the other hand, how'm I goin' to dig a hole—"

His startled eyes flicked to the knoll down which he had recently ridden. Three riders were hurtling in his direction, hauling rifles from saddle scabbards as they came.

Billy leaped into the saddle. "Hawse," he said, "let's you and me see how extemporaneous we can get somewheres else. Them gents are the sheriff, the coroner and the district attorney. And it ain't goin' to be no picnic."

The pinto slipped among the trees and started to climb the slope that led to the long ridge, high and far away. Bullets began raining about the fleeing horse and rider, but most of them fell to the rear.

"I betcha that's the first time you ever outran a bullet," he told the fast-tiring pony. "I wisht—"

He broke off the sentence with a grunt as a bullet caught him in the left shoulder, nearly knocking him from the saddle.

But the game little horse raced onward. More bullets thudded into the ground, and one lodged in the cantle of the saddle.

Billy heard a yell as one of the men, far in advance of the others, began swiftly overtaking the laboring pinto.

The cowboy looked back. "That'd be the coroner," he said grimly.

He had no rifle, but the lead man was close enough for six-shooter work, and he painfully got his pistol into his hand. But it hurt him to turn around. Somehow, he didn't care much whether or not he shot the man. He felt very, very weary all of a sudden.

Then he heard the sharp spat of a rifle, and the man close behind him flipped out of the saddle as his horse somersaulted. Billy didn't know what had happened, but he was strong for whatever it was. And suddenly he came out of his lethargy, turned in the saddle and fired at the next nearest pursuer.

The first three bullets missed, but the fourth caused the rider to sag, drop his rifle and grab for the saddle horn.

"Only the district attorney left," Billy mumbled, reloading his gun.

But the third man was gaining. The pinto was staggering, game to the last. Billy wanted to turn and shoot the oncoming rifleman, but the effort seemed beyond his strength.

Then came another shot from up on the ridge, and the pursuer went down with his horse. Billy reined in the pinto, admonishing it to take its time.

"Court," he croaked to the pony, "is adjourned."

In the shadow of a giant crag at the side of the trail, Billy decided to lie down. But he was too weak to dismount. The difficulty was solved when he tumbled off and lay under the pony's feet.

It took him quite a while to readjust his mental faculties when he finally revived. By that time, though, his shoulder wound had been bandaged tightly with something pink, his face had been washed and the pinto had been led away. Billy opened his eyes.

"Howdy," he said. "I hope you're well."

"Oh, are you all right?"

"Say fifteen-twenty words all in a row," Billy demanded of the girl sitting at his side.

"Why?" she wondered, crinkling her nose.

"Beats any dang music I ever heard," he said, gazing at her until she blushed in confusion. "I like my scenery with music."

"You must be all right," she said.

"Shore. Just restin' a minute. Was that you up there savin' me for future reference?"

The girl smiled. "I shot a couple of Circle Cross horses, if that's what you mean."

"Well, that's prob'ly what I mean," he said. "Who was them gents? And why did you come to my rescue like the Marines?"

"I recognized the men through my field glasses," she answered. "And I know that whatever you did, it couldn't have been as bad as they are doing every day of their lives."

"I hadn't got around to doin' anything yet," Billy said. "They just busted down on me without takin' me into their confidence, or anything. They must have been vexed about somethin'."

"Do you mean to say you don't know who they are?"

"That's practically the point I was tryin' to make," he admitted. "You see, I'm a kinda stranger here, which I can now see was a blunder." He was looking into her big blue eyes.

"The Circle Cross," she said, "is a grasping, gun-fighting outfit which is ruining the Valley and driving out honest people. Bossed by Bull Tucker, the men never hesitate at murder, forgery, kidnaping, anything. They are beastly."

She got up then. "Can you ride now?" she asked.

"Shore," he grinned. "I see you done upholstered me. I feel as fit as a fiddle . . . a busted one. Where we goin'?"

"You need a better dressing for your wound, and probably something to eat."

Billy grinned again. "Eat?" he said. "Now where at have I heard that word before?"

They mounted and climbed the rest of the way to the top of the long ridge, then across a mesa and down into a basin.

"There is the Canthook spread," the girl said. "Until the first it belongs to the Hallors, of which I seem to be the only one left in the country."

Her voice took on too much of a tinge of sadness to suit Billy, who lifted his head and looked closely at her.

"Seem to be? Whaddaya mean, seem to be?" he demanded.

"Daddy left a month ago for Arizona to visit his brother and to borrow five thousand dollars. It was for a mortgage, due the first—three days away. I never have heard a word since the day he rode away."

"You mean he just hauled off and disappeared?"

She nodded.

"Yeah, but—uh—folks don't do that," he argued. "Didja write down there to find out if and why?"

"And which, what and when," she smiled, wanly.

"And no dice?" he asked.

"No answer yet. But then I wrote only a week ago."

"Mortgages," said Billy after a while, "get ripe awful fast, once they start turnin'. Who holds it?"

"The bank in El Segundo."

"Try gettin' it extended?"

"Daddy did. No chance. That is why he went to Arizona."

"There ought," said Billy, judiciously, "to be a law agin mortgages."

"But that isn't the worst of it," the girl said shortly. "Two or three weeks ago, Bull Tucker wrote me a note saying daddy owed the Circle Cross—or him—three thousand dollars. Said he had issued them a note the day before he went away."

"Well, he may have it to apply on the mortgage. Prob'ly got it for that purpose," the cowboy said. But the girl refused to be comforted.

"He said it was due on the first, too," she said.

"Gosh," grumbled Billy, "there ought to be a law agin the first of the month."

They rode in at the ranch yard, and Billy attended to the horses. By the time he had watered, fed and rubbed down the pinto, the girl had supper ready, although it was only mid-afternoon.

"You cook," Billy said, "like a hand-painted angel. Them biskits are as poetic as the beat of a humming bird's heart, and the venison steak as delicious as a golden moment snatched from a flittin' hour."

"You sound like a poet, yourself," she said.

"How far is it to El Segundo?" he wondered.

"Seven miles. Now, I'm going to heat some water and change that bandage. It needs a thorough cleansing, and perhaps you should see Doctor James in town."

"Do me a favor, will you?" Billy asked.

"Of course."

"Uh—heck, it's kinda hard to ask it—I—uh—would you mind usin' for a bandage—uh—somethin' like you—uh—already used? Something—of yores?"

A wave of red surged over the girl's face, as she turned to go into another room. "I'll see what I've got," she called back.

It was nearly dusk when he rode toward town. He had wanted to give the pinto a rest, and he hated to tear himself away from the only Hallor left in the country.

"Will you be back this way?" she wondered.

"Shore," he said. "I got to get me a job somewheres, and I figger on bein' back a lot."

"Unless daddy gets back within three

days—I—won't be here," she said. "I shall have to vacate on the second. I'll go into town, probably, and wait for him."

"I'll be back before then," Billy promised.

The cowboy had to find a job. Now he wanted one more than ever before, so he could be near that gorgeous girl. But most of all, he wanted to do something for her now, so that she would not lose the ranch.

But what could he do? A forty-a-month cowhand with fifteen or twenty dollars in his pocket and no job in sight! He could only hope that Mr. Hallor would get back in time to save the Canthook.

He stabled the pinto and made his way to the Shorthorn Bar. He wanted to get a job before anything else, to make certain he was going to stay in the country. The Shorthorn would, he assumed, be the cowmen's headquarters.

Billy bought a drink for himself and the bartender, and noted that there were only a few others in the saloon. Too early, he decided to wait. A few others straggled in, started games or leaned at the bar.

Billy was half asleep, but something stirred him into sudden wakefulness. Then he knew what it was. For a voice said:

"Yeah, still missin'. I don't know what Katy will do if'n he don't git here tomorrow or next day."

Katy! Why, that was the name the gunman had mentioned, to whom those saddle pockets were to be given!

Billy had not forgotten his errand. It was one of the reasons why he had ridden to El Segundo immediately. But he had not wanted to mention it to the girl. Somehow, he had not wanted her to know that he had killed a man. And he surely didn't want her to know he was inquiring for a Katy! She might not understand and he couldn't have explained. But now . . .

"How long's Joe been gone?" another cowman asked.

"About four weeks, and no word from him. Somethin' must have happened to him. He was awful fond of that kid of his."

The conversation turned into other channels, but Billy wanted to know more. Could that girl who saved his life be named Katy? The gunman he had killed said something about dinero. . . .

The young puncher turned to the cowmen.

"Pardon me, gents," he said, "but I'm lookin' for a feller named Hallor. Owns the Canthook spread somewhere near here. Could you tell me how to reach his place?"

They eyed him for a moment, then one of them replied:

"We was just talkin' about him. But he ain't home now, or wasn't a couple of hours ago. Been away. You know him?"

"No, but a feller I used to ride for in New Mex knows him and said I might get a job there," Billy lied.

"No chance," the second cattleman spoke up. "Hallor's washed up, busted. He shore ain't takin' on any men, that's a fact. But don't take my word for it. Ride out there and see his daughter. It's only seven-eight miles."

"This friend of mine said he had a daughter. Named Jennie, ain't she?" Billy said.

"Naw, her name's Katherine. Everybuddy around hyar calls her Katy."

"Thanks," Billy murmured, stumbling outside. It had just occurred to him that he had killed her father!

Not until that moment had he imagined for an instant that the vicious looking killer was the parent of such a wonderful girl, not even when his suspicions were first aroused by the two men in their conversation. Somehow he had not until now connected the fact that her father had gone after money, and that the man he had killed asked that the money be delivered to Katy.

Well, he had a duty to perform. He

had to deliver the money, now hidden under the mattress in his room at the hotel, and he had to tell Katy Hallor he had killed her father.

There was no use trying to sleep, but he went to his room and guarded the money, now doubly precious because it belonged to the girl with whom he had fallen in love on short notice. She who would scorn him, of course. But he had to do it. There would be no compromising —she had to be told. Not for a moment did he think of evading it.

He was riding out before daylight, mainly because he had become sick of his room. He couldn't think, penned up that way.

He reached the Canthook ranch in time for breakfast. Katherine saw him riding in and went to the door, now attired in a freshly-laundered dress instead of overalls and chaps. Billy swallowed hard when she smiled a welcome, and got off his horse slowly, clumsily.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked then. "Your wound worse?"

He shook his head, sat down on the porch. She joined him.

"You look as though you had not slept, and you're pale. Did you see the doctor?"

He again shook his head. Then he swallowed some more and cleared his throat.

"Miss Hallor, I guess you—you—will hate me after I tell you, but—well—I killed yore daddy!" he blurted. What was the sense in prolonging it?

"You—what?" The girl gasped, her eyes wide and unbelieving. He nodded.

"But how—why—what for?"

Now here was the problem. He dare not tell her the truth—that the man was trying to kill him in order to steal his horse.

"That's why them fellers was chasin' me yesterday," he said. "He—yore father was—uh—at that spring. I saw—he—uh —had some money in his saddle pockets so I killed him and took the dinero. I—uh—don't know why I done it. I brought you the m-money."

The girl was now staring into his face as if hypnotized, an expression of loathing coming over her face.

"You—killed—my—daddy!" She spoke the words slowly, as if trying to understand from their sound the truth.

He said nothing, head cupped in his hands. Katherine's eyes were dry. So was her throat. She could not speak.

Billy got up, went to his saddle and removed the pockets, dropping them at the girl's feet.

As in a dream, she opened the pockets, took out the money, mostly in large bills, noted the wrappers stamped with the amount in each package.

Billy was not watching her. Finally she said:

"I don't—I can't—somehow—believe it. You wouldn't deliberately kill a man for money. Are you telling me the entire truth?"

He nodded.

"Describe him," she requested.

"Big, heavy-set, black hair, wearin' batwing chaps," he mumbled. Only too well could he close his eyes and see him lying there at the side of the spring.

"That's daddy," she said with an effort. Again he nodded miserably.

The girl arose. "I want to cry my heart out for—him—and because of the way it happened," she said. "But I've got to be brave—and sensible. Tomorrow is the first day of the month. The mortgage and that note, both at the bank, are due. Something might happen if I delay. I must ride into town and pay them. After that—well, we'll consider other things."

He lifted his head then and looked off down the valley. It was a beautiful country—but not for him. He sighed. The girl said:

"Do you know how much there is here?"

He shook his head. She looked at him sharply, then asked:

"How did you know he was my daddy? Why didn't you tell me yesterday?"

"He—he said to give the money—to—Katy. You—I didn't know yesterday yore name was Katy. Overheard some men talkin'—asked 'em. They said that was yore name. Then—I come out."

She picked up the money, and said, "There is twenty thousand dollars here. Enough money to pay the mortgage and note and have plenty to restock the spread."

She started into the house. Billy got up and stumbled blindly toward his horse. The girl called:

"I wonder if you'd mind staying here until I get back? Every time I leave the house somebody steals something. You see, I'm all alone, and I've been missing a number of little articles belonging to me."

Billy turned back to the porch, his heart a shade lighter. Anyway, she was trusting him to protect her home. But the lightness was only momentary, for she continued:

"I want you to ride down there with me and dig up daddy's body. The sheriff will want to hold an inquest."

An inquest. Of course. And Billy Laidlaw would hang! That was something else he had not thought of. And he couldn't offer a plea of self-defense. But would the body be there? Maybe those Circle Cross riders buried it. Katy had assumed that Billy had buried her father. But what if they had not?

Well, there was only one thing to do. He would stay there until she had identified the body and then, at the first opportunity, he would high-tail it. He certainly was not going to hang just to save the girl he loved from knowing her father was a killer. That would be carrying things a bit too far.

The girl came out directly, dressed for riding. "I think you should stable your horse and stay in the house. Perhaps you can catch that sneak thief that way," she suggested.

He got up and stabled his pinto. His mind was too numb to do any thinking on his own account. Katy saddled her own horse.

It was about an hour later that the cowboy was aroused from his stupor. He was sitting on a couch in the living room when he thought he heard a window slide upward. He listened and then heard footsteps in Katy's bedroom.

He tiptoed to the door, peeked through the keyhole. A man was burglarizing her dresser. Billy's first impulse was to seize him, but suddenly he changed his mind. His brain was functioning again.

The burglar selected a cheap metal rouge compact, dropped it into his vest pocket, clambered back out of the window, closed it, and made his way down into the willows below the barn. Billy watched him until he was out of sight, then ran for his own mount.

"She said somebody was stealin' a lot of little personal items," he said to himself. "It doesn't make sense. So the only way to find out is to trail the thief."

The young puncher was a good trailer, and soon discovered a distinguishing mark in the shod horse of the burglar. He had little trouble in following closely and still keeping out of sight.

He rode for nearly three hours, bringing up at a wire gate. A board nailed on a post proclaimed it to be the Horseshoe ranch.

"Shenanagins," Billy said, almost his old self now that there was something to take his mind off his troubles. "But I'd be plumb chewed up and spit out if I tried to go in there now, I reckon. I got to use me some caution."

He went into hiding, occasionally swinging his field glasses onto the ranch, about a mile distant.

It looked like an ordinary cow spread.

Cowboys rode in and went to the bunkhouse. Horses were turned into the pasture, chores were done. Just regular ranch routine, as far as he could see. Still that burglar had ridden straight for this place, and Billy intended to know why.

At dark he rode into the pasture and around back of the barn. There he tethered the pinto and stole up to the bunkhouse. Nobody there. It was dark.

By devious paths, he made his way to a spot below a lighted window in the big house. The cowhands were eating supper, but the dining room was further back. Billy discovered that he was under the kitchen window.

Not much chance to learn anything here. But a voice in the kitchen said:

"Better take some chuck out to th' ol' man, Corkscrew. He et yet?"

"I was jus' a-fixin' him some'p'n," the colored cook answered. "He don' eat much."

Billy hugged the wall, waited. There might be something to learn here, after all.

Soon the colored cook stepped off the stoop, cursing his rheumatism, and hobbled out into the darkness a short distance. Billy turned his eyes and could see a dark blob.

"Root cellar, mebbe," he said to himself, stealing along in the wake of the chef.

He heard a key turn a lock, then the footsteps of the cook slowly descending a stair. He ran to the doorway, stealthily went down, feeling his way by inches. He heard, almost at his ear, the cook say:

"Done brung yuh some suppah, Mistah. Fixed yuh up some'p'n kind speshal. Wait till I pry loose that gag."

Silence for a moment. Then a sigh.

"I'll strike a match, Mistah. Hol' everythin'." The cook lighted a lamp—and Billy's gun smashed him down.

He jerked a knife from his pocket and quickly slashed the ropes that bound the heavy-set, dark complexioned man. Billy had got himself a hunch.

"You Mr. Hallor?" he asked in a whisper.

The man, still rubbing his jaws and yet unable to talk because of the prolonged wearing of the gag, nodded.

"Let's get goin'," the young puncher said. He led the shambling man up the stair, and out across the yard as fast as the cowman's stiffened legs would permit.

"Got to steal you a hawse," Billy said, after they had reached the pinto. "Wait here."

He knew there would be a wrangling mount in the stable or corral. The men were still at the supper table. Billy worked stealthily but fast. Soon he joined the cowman, leading the animal.

"Can you ride?" he asked. Hallor grunted. Billy helped him into the saddle. Then slowly they rode out.

The cowboy was never so happy in his life. He didn't stop to wonder who it was he had killed, or why the gunman had asked that he deliver the money to "Katy." He only knew he had not killed the father of the girl he loved. It was a nice, round, well-populated world, practically all of them nice people.

Hallor was able to talk after a few minutes. "How did you know I was being kept a prisoner by the Circle Cross?" he asked.

The cowboy chuckled. "I didn't," he said. "It's a long story. I was at yore house when a feller from that spread clumb into a window and stole somethin' belongin' to yore daughter, so I trailed him, is all."

"They've got my daughter, too," Hallor said.

"Says which?"

"They are holding her somewhere, have had her for three weeks. They have already forced me to sign one note for three thousand dollars. I am losing the ranch—and I'm afraid I'm losing Katy."

"Wait a minute," said Billy. "Yore daughter has not been kidnaped. Shucks, I saw her six-seven hours ago. How do you figger?"

"Every day they'd bring me some little personal article belonging to her, to prove that they were holding her a prisoner. That's why I signed the note," the cowman murmured.

"The gag was that they was afraid to kidnap a woman, so they worked on you that way, by stealin' them things. How come you was a prisoner?"

"I started to ride into Arizona for money to pay off the mortgage. Two men roped me out of the saddle the first day, blindfolded me and carried me to the Horseshoe, owned by the Circle Cross. The cook told me where I was. He was very kind, that colored man."

"I didn't bump him very hard," Billy said.

When Hallor saw a light gleaming from a window of the ranch house, he sent his horse dashing madly down the hill. Billy grinned happily in the darkness.

He was sitting on the corral fence, having sent the Horseshoe horse galloping back home, when Katy came out looking for him an hour later.

She stood there for a full minute, her throat constricting, unable to say what she had come to say. Finally, Billy said:

"Nice evenin', ain't it?"

"The most glorious evening I ever knew," Katy replied. "And what a beautiful, beautiful liar you are, Mr. Billy Laidlaw."

"Huh?"

"I don't know what happened down at the spring yesterday, but whatever it was, you lied magnificently in order to spare my feelings, because you thought you had killed my father. I somehow knew all the time that it just had to be self-defense. You are a pretty wonderful person, do you know?"

"Aw, shucks," said Billy, embarrassedly. "Uh—what about the mortgage and notes? They paid?"

"Everything, and plenty of money left. But now—who gave you that money?"

"A feller, dark and kinda ugly, like I said. Somebody's comin'!"

"Why, I wonder who it could be," said the girl.

"Get into the house," Billy requested, gruffly. "They're prob'ly lookin' for me."

They were.

Billy leaped to one side, firing at the flash of one of the men's guns. The latter's bullet went wide, missing him by a foot, but his shot took effect as the rider toppled, swayed in the saddle, then gently slid to the ground.

Two of the others were in action now. A bullet tore into Billy's leg, knocking him down. But it saved him from taking a slug in the neck.

Then there came a roar from the house, and a second rider slithered out of the saddle.

Now the leader was firing at Billy, who, lying on his side, made a poor target in the darkness. He sent two more shots into the flashes. A horse reared, fell back, taking its rider, who began screaming.

Still the leader continued to curse and shoot, first at the cowboy, then at the window from which shots were coming.

"The man," Billy said, reloading with difficulty, "has gone off'n his nut."

Billy finally got his gun in working order and slammed three slugs at the cursing man on the horse. Then a roar from the window of the house, and the rider seemed to be hurled into the roadway.

Another of the wounded men started crawling away. Billy shot in front of him.

"Hell, that's enough for one day," he said, placing his pistol on the ground and cuddling up to it

Again it was Katy's big blue eyes that greeted his vision after a period of unconsciousness.

"Oh, my dear, my dear! Are you all right?" he heard an angelic voice murmur.

"Shore," he grinned—or tried to. "How's all yore folks?"

"I was so afraid. You were shot three times, you know. The doctor just left, with the sheriff. They took the three bodies and the wounded man with them."

" 'At's good," Billy said. "Was they the ones that chased me into yore arms the other day?"

"Two of them were," she answered. "They said you killed their friend who was bringing some money to their boss. At least, that's what the wounded man told the sheriff. They said you took the money."

"In which," Billy said, "they was eminently correct."

"You were not supposed to give it to me at all."

"No? Well, I'll be teetotally cow-kicked! It was somebody else, huh?"

"Yes, but the sheriff said, in view of certain things about which he knows, the matter has been dropped so far as his office is concerned. Sheriff Bachelor and daddy were boyhood friends and went to school together."

"I always figgered a man ought to have plenty of schoolin'," Billy said.

"Because, you see, the principal man—the man to whom that money was to have gone—was the man who held the mortgage on this place, who had daddy kidnaped and forced him to sign that note."

Hallor entered the room, shook Billy's good hand. "Looks kinda like you saved me, the ranch, Katy and the whole damn valley," he said. "Now how'm I goin' to make up a little of what I owe you?"

"I been paid," Billy said.

"Paid?" The cowman looked puzzled. "Paid? How?"

"I met yore daughter," said the cowboy, solemnly.

"Billy!" Katy was bending over him, fussing with the bandages. He kissed her ear.

"Sweet ear," he said. Katy nodded.

"I know," she said. "Made that way listening to you say such nice things."

Hallor cleared his throat. "I need a partner. I see I'm goin' to get one whether I need him or not."

"Who," asked Billy then, "was I supposed to deliver that dinero to?"

Katy smiled. "Why, didn't you know? The man who led those men in here tonight to kill you—the El Segundo banker and owner of the Circle Cross—is Katy—Jason H. Katy."

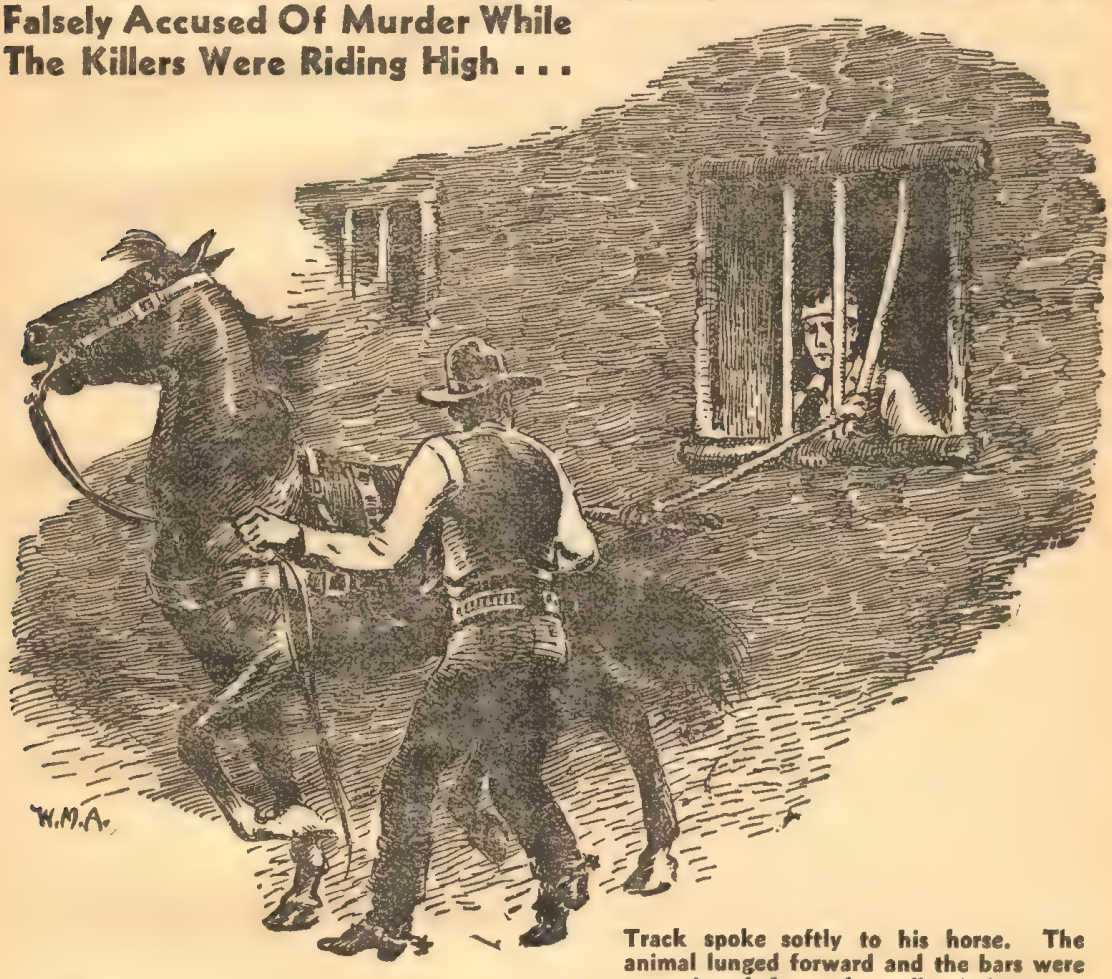
THE BRITCHES KID

By

HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "OUTLAW'S PRICE," "COWBOY GONE WRONG," *etc.*

Joel Lunderford Felt Only Bitter Hatred For His Son. But Even That Didn't Stop The Button From Fighting For His Dad Who Was Falsely Accused Of Murder While The Killers Were Riding High . . .



Track spoke softly to his horse. The animal lunged forward and the bars were ripped from the cell window

Nobody knew his name, and nobody knew where his nickname had originated. Very young, he was a range tramp, small and thin, with big, hungry blue eyes. He looked funny in his ragamuffin clothing, yet no man laughed. In armpit holsters, under his frayed Indian beadwork vest, he carried a pair of double-action .38 Colts which he could use with the dexterity of a sleight-of-hand artist. As to how he'd come by the weapons—nobody knew that, either.

"Belly up here, Little Britches," called one of the men at the bar, "and drown yore sorrers on me. C'mon!"

The youth rose from one of the tables and walked over to the only cowboy friend he had made in this county.

"I guess you've forgotten that I never drink, Jim. I just stepped in out o' the

sun while my buckskin's eatin' a nickel's worth o' oats. I'm ridin' far now. That medicine-show fortune-teller last night, he told me—somethin'. And so I—I—'Say, Jim, who's that?"

A tall, thin rail of a man, nearing fifty, longhorn-mustached, was coming between the batwing doors. He had a stiff L-shaped knee, which shortened one leg by several inches and made his walk a curious up-and-down hobble.

"His name's Holloway," said the cowboy, "makes a whole track with his right foot, and half a track with his left; Track-and-a-half Holloway, we calls him. Mean as a snake, and can out-shoot the devil with that lone old smoke-wagon o' his. Er, that forchune-teller, Britches Kid; what—"

"Look!" the youth interrupted.

Close by, old Track-and-a-half Holloway was unceremoniously clawing men away from the bar in order to make room for himself. He settled down on his short leg and bawled for a double slug of redeye. The bartender didn't know this, his newest patron. When he set the glass on the mahogany, Holloway had risen on his long leg to his full six feet two.

"Where the Sam Hill," snorted the bartender, "is that short, sawed-off old horned toad who wanted this forty-rod rye?"

A dozen men roared with laughter. Track-and-a-half's eternally squinted gray eyes caught fire. Swiftly he jerked his worn old Colt from leather and struck at his nearest neighbor, who ducked. The blow just glanced Little Britches' nose.

With blood trickling from his mouth, the boy snatched out a .38 and sprang clear. Each of this oddly assorted pair of belligerents leveled a gun at the other in the same fraction of a second—and then froze.

"I'd hate to shoot a cripple," said the Kid. "Drop it!"

The slack-jawed onlookers saw Holloway do something that he had never done before. They saw him relax his grip on his gun and let it fall clattering to the floor. His face turned death-white under the coppery sunburn. The Britches Kid's lips curled in a sneer. Without a backward glance he holstered his Colt and walked out of the saloon.

Track-and-a-half Holloway stood there frozen for long seconds, staring as though across a thousand miles, like a man trying to remember . . .

Just after nightfall he overtook the youth at a water-hole in the edge of the Santa Catalina Range of barren hills. Track-and-a-half apologized — something else he never had done before—and the Britches Kid accepted his apology. Then the two sat down before the tiny fire. Presently the Kid spoke.

"I never believed in fortune-tellin'. But that medicine-show jigger, he seemed to know. Kept tellin' me to go home. Said I was needed bad. And I decided I'd go."

Holloway's memory had served him perfectly. His face was stern but there was a twinkle in his eyes. "Shucks," he drawled, "I can tell fortunes myself, jist by lookin' into fire coals like them right there. Don't believe it, son? Well, listen.

"I see a big cattleman over in Nueva Mex. Married to a fine, purty woman with bright blue eyes. I see her dyin' when her baby is borned, and the cattleman cain't bear the sight o' that child and won't even bother to name it—hard rock, Joel Lunderford is. When the boy is about fourteen, he ups and runs off. He shore was a plum' fine kid . . ."

The Kid sprang to his feet, every muscle quivering, his blue eyes wide. Holloway went on talking.

"I'd nearly forgot you, and you had forgot me. I hadn't went to hell and been shot in the knee then, but was ridin' range fer yore daddy. And I'm goin' home with you, Kid. Mebbe you won't need me. But ef you do need me, I'll be there."

Young Lunderford sat down. After a long minute he said, simply, "All right."

Four nights later they rode across rolling grasslands filled with prime whiteface cattle, and up to the headquarters of Joel Lunderford's Bar 88 outfit. The big frame-and-adobe ranch house was lighted, and the music of fiddle and guitar and the sounds of dancing feet came out to them. The two riders drew rein in the shadows of a bunch of creek cottonwoods. Little Britches turned with half an oath to Holloway.

"That sure don't sound like my dad. Couldn't 'a' got foolish in his old days, could he, and married again, or somethin'?" Without waiting for an answer he added, "You hold my little hawss, Track, and I'll find out what's what."

Passing the buckskin's reins to the still silent Holloway, he slipped to the ground and went through the pale starlight toward the house.

At the long, weather-beaten hitch-rail before the gate he came upon three saddled horses, and nearby were two buckboards with teams hitched in. He went on to an open front window of the big living room, and peered through. Of his tall, gaunt, bearded father he saw nothing. What he did see drove his slender hands toward the guns holstered under his frayed vest.

There were four dance hall girls from the nearest town, Mesquit Bluffs. With them were five men. All were laughing, talking, or singing maudlin snatches of ribald ditties as they danced with drunken abandon.

Three of the men were young and overdressed. All were strangers to young Lunderford. Another man was around forty, heavily built and darkly sunburned, and his manner showed that he was not accustomed to wearing good clothing such as he had on now. But the Britches Kid's narrowed gaze riveted upon the fifth man.

"Byrd Snell!" he muttered in pinched, bleak tones.

Snell had been a familiar figure in both town and county during the Britches Kid's boyhood days. A lawyer, he was suave and smooth, very blond, tall, dressed in black broadcloth with a brocade vest, navy blue string tie and white shirt. His costly Spanish boots were in three colors of leather.

The music and the dancing suddenly stopped. With a raucous laugh, Snell left his flushed partner and carried a drink to the grinning fiddler. One of the young blades, waving a bottle in his hand, approached the mantel over which hung a faded portrait of a handsome woman—a good woman who had died in giving life to her son.

"Luck to you, sweetness!" babbled the drunk. "Whoever and whatever and wherever you are—and how I'd like to dance with you!"

Almost before the words were out of his mouth a ragamuffin figure appeared in the front doorway, a pair of .38's crashed. The bottle tinkled downward, and the drinker collapsed upon the floor. A girl screamed. Three of the men sprang up hastily to retrieve their weapons.

"Hold it!" barked the Britches Kid.

The heavy-set, sunburned man dropped to one knee behind his girl. His hand groped on the nearby table for his ivory-handled gun. Young Lunderford hunkered down and sent a .38 slug whistling under the table at the man's arm. Then a derringer spat from behind another girl and the youth in the doorway felt the burn of a bullet across his left temple.

Fighting grimly to retain his senses, he flattened himself on the threshold and tried to see through the swirling haze of gunsmoke. Dimly he heard the staccato voice of Track-and-a-half Holloway com-

ing from the door that opened into the big dining room.

"Git 'em up, you buzzards that hides behind wimmen! The Kid was afraid o' hittin' a damned skirt, but I ain't—" Track Holloway's old Colt bellowed, and quicker than an echo there was another explosion, a shot which wrecked the large opal-shaded lamp, and instant blackness swooped down upon the living room.

The Britches Kid felt himself going down in spite of himself. He seemed tumbling through the darkness, falling into an abysmal void, falling . . .

Some two hours later when he opened his eyes uncertainly, he found himself staring at the flame of a smoky kerosene lamp on an adobe wall. A few steps beyond a door he could see iron bars. He put a hand to his head, felt a bandage there. It was then that he noticed a tall, gaunt, bearded man near him. And that man was his father!

Joel Lunderford and his son were prisoners in the same cell in the Mesquit County jail! The elder Lunderford stood like a stone image against the outer wall, his somber, deepset eyes upon his son. He said not a word and his face was without emotion of any kind.

When the youth was sure that this was no figment of his imagination, he spoke.

"You know me, Dad?" he asked.

Joel Lunderford must have heard, but he gave no sign of recognition.

Bitter disappointment crept into the young boy's voice as he spoke again.

"I wanted to help out," he said. "Learnt that you needed me back here. Sort o' balled it up, maybe. But I'm not licked yet by one hell of a sight. Wish you'd tell me what the trouble is, Dad. Sure wish you would."

Still the old man did not speak; nor was there the faintest sign that this boy was his son.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and the figures of two men appeared at the cell door between Little Britches and the smoky lamp. One of the men was Byrd Snell. The other was the lanky, grizzled sheriff, Tom Aberdeen. The officer spoke first.

"You come to, Kid? The doc said you would, right soon. I—"

Snell interrupted brusquely with a high-and-mighty air. "Now, bad *muchacho*, suppose you tell us who you are. And who was the crippled old pepperpod with you at the Bar 88?"

The fact that they didn't know him was hardly a surprise to Little Britches. He sat up and addressed the officer.

"You talk first, and then I will—if I happen to feel like it, and don't change my mind. I want the answer to this: What's this man doin' in here?" He nodded toward his father. "And what happened to the crippled hombre?"

Aberdeen took his job seriously. He was a lawman first and a human being afterward. The boy's defiant attitude nettled him. "By tomorrow, you'll likely find out that you're in jail," he growled. "Let's go, Byrd."

SNELL followed the officer back to the sheriff's office at the front of the building. When they had been gone for a few minutes, the boy looked again toward old Joel. Still the elder Lunderford did not speak. Exasperated, hurt, his son went to the barred window and stood there looking out into the night.

For a long time he stood there. Then before him there bobbed up dimly a lined, coppery face wearing longhorn mustaches. Holloway was at the window!

"Shore glad to find you alive," Track-and-a-half whispered. "I got our hawsses waitin' back here in the alley. Take this old smokepole, son, an' . . . Say, Kid, who's that in there with you? Why, hell, if it ain' yore daddy!"

Joel Lunderford heard that. He looked around, that was all.

Thinking fast and hard, the Britches Kid began to whisper guardedly.

"Track, I think I got a plan. First thing, you find the livery stable here, and see if you cain't pick up a single set o' harness out of a wagon or buckboard in the stable lot, without makin' any noise. Then—"

He hurried on with it. When he had finished, old Track-and-a-half went bobbing away silently in the night. Little Britches turned to his cellmate and breathed, "If you want to get out o' here, be ready." Old Joel said nothing, but he came to his feet and stood tense, waiting.

Holloway found the harness and made away with it unseen. He put it on his rawboned roan, led the horse to a point near the cell window, and hooked the traces around the bars.

Then the man outside spoke softly to the horse and jabbed a knotty thumb into its lean ribs. The animal bent to the traces. With a squeal and a crash the bars were ripped out of the window sill. The noise had carried to the office and the jailer was coming on the run.

"Quick!" whispered the Britches Kid to his father. "Get through!"

The youngster jabbed a worn Colt between the bars of the cell door almost into the jailer's face.

"Hold it!" the little prisoner barked. "Don't move a hair, and don't try yellin' —and I mean *don't!*"

Joel Lunderford was too large a man to get through the cell window easily. Holloway aided him. Just as his feet struck the ground outside, the jailer broke and ran. Little Britches dove through the window, colliding with old Track-and-a-half.

"Throw off that harness and wait for me in the alley," snapped the Kid, and he sped toward the front of the jail. Hoarse cries of "Jail break, help!" were cutting through the night. Then the barrel of a gun came down on the jailer's head and he sat down foolishly.

It was long past midnight. Even the saloons and the dance halls were closed, and as yet there had been no response to the jailer's cry for help. The Kid hurried into the sheriff's office. He searched for and found the little guns and the cartridges that had been taken from him, snatched them up and was gone.

Old Lunderford rode in Holloway's saddle, and Holloway rode behind. The buckskin carried its owner and the two bedrolls. Since both the animals were dogweary and there was no sign of pursuit, they traveled at a moderate gait. Scarcely a word passed between them until they had cleared the outskirts of the town.

"What happened at the house, Track?" Little Britches asked.

"Well," Holloway answered, "a good deal happened. I left our hawsses in the cottonwoods and sneaked after you. Only, I went in from the back.

"I said I didn't mind shootin' a gal, but I lied. It was Byrd Snell got you with the derringer, and I'd 'a' shore drapped him ef I hadn't jerked my aim to keep from hittin' a danged skirt. Well, then somebody they called Stanfer Jett, he shot the lamp out.

"That ended the gun-fightin', 'count o' the gals. I'd seen you go down, and I tried to git to you. But the whole gang jumped me in the dark and knocked me cold.

"When I come to I'm in the back end o' a buckboard, tied up, and everybody's talkin' to this jigger they calls Jett. But I soon discovers I ain't tied very good—one o' them drunks, o' course—and after we'd all started fer town I got loose and clim' out o' the buckboard in the dark, and nobody seen me.

"Well, I goes back to the house to look up a gun and git our hawsses. Had to wait until some cowpokes had went back to the bunkhouse, then I found my old

smokepole where she'd fell in a corner. So I got our hawsses and lit a shuck fer town. Say, Joel, listen. Who is that heavy-set, sunburnt jigger they called Stanfer Jett?"

Old Lunderford remembered Holloway, had liked him in other days. For the first time in six years young Lunderford heard his father's deep bass drawl.

"Jett's the new Bar 88 foreman," began Lunderford. "He's Byrd Snell's right-hand man. Byrd is Mesquit Bluffs' big, high-muck now. He owns a bank, a store, two saloons, and the dance hall.

"I decided to restock my place with all Hereford cattle, and needed twelve thousand dollars, so I borrowed it from Snell. My foreman, Ransie Garland—better'n a brother to me, but I couldn't see it then—kicked about this. At last he comes out and tells me Snell is as crooked as a snake's track; said he'd knowed Snell in Idaho. I—

"I can see now," he proceeded, "that Ransie had somethin' on Byrd, but was afraid to tell it. Ransie and me got into a hot quarrel over this borrowin' from Snell, and there were some witnesses, and two hours after that my foreman was shot —in the back—and I was arrested charged with the lowdown crime. The truth is, he was killed to keep him quiet, and to put me in jail so that Byrd Snell could get his hooks into the whole Bar 88 Ranch!"

"I see. Byrd's protectin' his twelve-thousand-dollar interest now, he lets on," Holloway muttered and the cattleman nodded.

"How many o' the old boys is left on the place now?" asked the boy.

Joel Lunderford would not answer. It passed understanding, that old bitterness. In this one respect, perhaps the man was not quite sane. Track-and-a-half put the same question, and had an answer promptly:

"Four o' the old boys left, four out o' eighteen. The two Watson brothers, Pid and Ack, Jim Esau and Bill Rowe; all top hands, which is the only reason why Jett didn't fire them too. Rest o' the eighteen are tough sticks o' Jett's and Snell's pick-in'."

They rode in silence. After a time the boy spoke. "We're outlawed, and we better do this for a starter: go home and get another hawss and saddle and gun, and some grub, if we have time before the sheriff and a posse comes. Maybe we'll have a scrap at the Bar 88. But that'll be all right. Likely most o' the boys'll be on the range by that time, though. The rest—we'll have to figure that out afterwards."

Silently the two older men agreed.

The new day's sun was peering over the range of sawtooth hills that rose in the east, and there was still no visible sign of pursuit when they sighted the ranch buildings. They approached under cover of the creek cottonwoods. Seven men were moving around the corrals and bunkhouse.

"Ack Watson and Jim Esau, Stanfer Jett and four o' the gang he took on when he fired my fourteen," said Joel Lunderford in low tones as he reined in.

His son drew rein a little back of him, took the .38 from his right armpit and a fifty box of cartridges from inside his tattered shirt, and silently passed them to Holloway. Old Track-and-a-half understood instantly. He pressed weapon and ammunition into the hands of the ranch owner.

"Most o' the seven is gittin' ready to foller the others to the range," Holloway explained. "Soon as they've gone, we'll—"

"Wait a minute," Little Britches cut in in a whisper. "I got an idea. Been thinkin' it over for the last hour. We're goin' to capture that Jett sidewinder and carry him off somewhere and hold him. Track, you

tell dad to stick here with the hawsses. Then come with me."

He dismounted and trailed rein and the two older men did likewise. The three crept forward, guns ready, taking advantage of all available cover.

They had reached a point within half a stone's throw of Jett and the six Bar 88 riders when Track-and-a-half's angular foot slipped and scraped on a stone. Stanfer Jett wheeled, his right hand itching to go for his ivory-butted Colt.

"Hold it!" bit out Little Britches, as he and his companions straightened up in plain view with their weapons leveled. "We'd rather not drill you, but we sure can. There ain't any skirt here for you to hide behind now, Mister Jett!"

The range boss and his four had frozen and stood staring. Jim Esau grinned. Ack Watson caught his employer's eye and winked. Esau spoke almost gleefully. "Want me to collect their hardware, Mr. Lunderford?"

"Yes," was the prompt answer. "Keep low, Jim, and don't stop some o' our lead by mistake."

Esau proceeded to collect the weapons with Watson's help. The newcomer trio moved forward briskly. Stanfer Jett swore as Ack Watson reached for his gun, then he darted for cover behind Ack. But the Britches Kid's .38 was barking, and a drop of scarlet appeared like a ruby in the lobe of the foreman's ear.

"Bum shot," said the Britches Kid, as Jett froze once more. "Next time I'll do better. I can hold 'em, Track. You go get what we rode here after. And hustle!"

Watson and Esau dropped five guns at the feet of the Kid. Then they left Little Britches holding the range boss and his four underlings and went to aid old Joel and Holloway in the task of getting together a food supply and canteens, a six-gun, a Winchester rifle and ammunition, and a saddled horse.

Jett swore viciously when they returned and bound his wrists at his back and threw him into his saddle. As the little cavalcade moved off with the captive riding in front, the Britches Kid called back to the four silent but scowling tough hombres, "I'm stoppin' in the cottonwoods there to make sure that you don't try to foller us. Also, don't pick up a gun too soon."

They rode across the creek and left the Kid hidden among the trees. One of Jett's men moved toward his gun. His hat jumped from his head as a .38 cracked. When the echo of the shot had died away, there was heavy silence, long minutes of it. Then the boy's sensitive ears caught the faint sounds of iron-shod hoofs on stone, on toward Mesquit Bluffs.

"Tom Aberdeen," he told himself.

He walked his buckskin for a hundred yards, then kicked the pony into a gallop that soon overtook the others. Old Lunderford, armed now with weapons of his own, drew the little gun and the ammunition for it from inside his shirt, was about to give them to his son, but gave them to Holloway instead.

"Return these, will you?" he requested.

Still hard, bitter hard. The Kid winced as he took his .38 and the cartridges from Holloway's hands. But he said quietly, "Aberdeen's comin'."

The trail that the sheriff and his men found later became lost in the creek many times, and petered out altogether on a stony flat.

Ack Watson lagged behind, and finally vanished. When he reappeared an hour afterward, he had with him his brother Pid and Bob Rowe.

Little Britches had been digging into his resourceful brain again for ideas. At last he slowed his pony until Rowe and Pid Watson were riding abreast with him, then remarked, "Ransie Garland was from Idaho, they told me, same as Byrd Snell. Happen to know what part?"

Watson shook his head. Bob Rowe had

a better answer. "Shore, Kid. Me and Rance was thick. He was from a place called Deep River."

After they had dismounted to go into camp at a seep spring in the hills, old Joel ordered Jim Esau to watch Stanfer Jett and beckoned the rest of them aside for a council of war. Jett was sweating and mad.

"Think you'll make me talk, do you?" he growled. "I'd see you all in hell first!"

The Britches Kid nodded. So Jett did know something to tell.

The owner of the Bar 88 had his say, most of it in whispers. As soon as it was dark enough, he'd ride to town and enlist the aid of some friends in the work of clearing himself. Meanwhile, the range must be watched; Jett's crew, left alone, was almost sure to drive off entire herds of cattle and sell them.

Afterwards the boy and old Track held a council of their own. For one thing, both were agreed that Joel Lunderford was paving his way back to jail again, so he must be kept here at any cost. And at sundown the Kid took two tins of beef, mounted and rode away.

A dim form trailed Tom Aberdeen from his office to his home that night. Aberdeen had just reached the gate when a low voice came from the deep shadow of a *retama* hedge close by. "I want a word with you, Sheriff. You cain't see me, but I can see you, and I'm gone if you reach for hardware. Reckon you've figured out who I am by this time. Sheriff, I want a truce with you, and I want to work with you in nailin' the worst jigger in this state. When it's over, I promise you faithful to give myself up—whether that fool I shot dies or lives. And also, if my daddy ain't cleared, I'll tell you where to find him. You game?"

Aberdeen was interested. "Who is this worst jigger?"

"Byrd Snell. I'm bettin' he got Stanfer Jett to shoot Ranse. Now hold on! I thought you'd buck at that. Sheriff, if you got the deadwood on Snell and Jett it'd sure be a feather in your hat . . .

Little Britches went on to tell all he knew and when he came to the point at which the thoughtless young drunk had insulted the memory of his mother, the Kid's voice broke in spite of himself.

The officer was impressed, and sympathetic and he agreed to the truce. The man Little Britches had shot on the Bar 88 was not going to die. A thing that Aberdeen didn't mention was the fact that he never had liked Byrd Snell. He took young Lunderford inside, and they went to work on a plan.

The next morning Snell hunted up Aberdeen and demanded why he wasn't out trying to round up the new outlaw gang. The sheriff smiled oddly and said nothing, which puzzled the big man of Mesquit Bluffs. Snell started for his office in the rear of the bank.

On the way, he met two prominent townsmen who eyed him hard and didn't speak. A woman in the bank also looked at him queerly. She was taking all her money out. He had just reached his desk when the old bookkeeper came in. There was something peculiar in the bookkeeper's gaze, too, he thought.

"What in hell is it that everybody knows but me?" he snapped.

The other shrugged. "Mr. Snell, we're going to have a run. Seven people have already drawn out every cent of their money, and more are coming for theirs right now. You'd better do something."

As anybody knows, a mere whisper will start a run on a bank. And there proved to be nothing that Snell could do. His former patrons flatly refused to talk (because they'd promised not to). And at noon, the town's biggest gambler approached him.

"Byrd," he said in undertones, "I want to buy you out. Store, saloon, dance hall,

but not the bank. Get a figure up for me, eh? And maybe you'd better hurry."

Joel Lunderford had done that gambler a favor once. Before Snell could put a question, the fellow was gone. Snell was now becoming white around the gills. Then a Mexican whom he did not recall ever having seen before came to an open rear window with a scrap of paper on which was printed in pencil a brief message. Snell took it and the Mexican vanished. These were the words the banker read:

Byrd:
Have five thousand cash ready for me.
Deep River.

Byrd Snell was paralyzed by fear.

Deep River! Only two men in this state had known about that, and one of them was dead . . . Have five thousand dollars ready, eh? As though he could! If he entered the vault to get the money, he'd be seen, and his mission guessed; by closing time not a penny would be left in the vault. Were it to save his life, he couldn't put his hands on five thousand dollars for Stanfer Jett or anybody else.

Little Britches Lunderford rode for the hills. He was smiling, for the plan was going to work. Track-and-a-half Holloway saw the Kid coming and walked out, bobbing curiously up and down, to meet him. Holloway, too, was pleased. Hastily they compared notes, added a few finishing touches to their plan, and then Little Britches rode back toward town.

Byrd Snell had bachelor quarters in the upstairs of the hotel. At ten o'clock that night he sat alone near a table on which burned a nickel-plated lamp. The banker was haggard and nervous. Stanfer Jett came in from the dark hallway. His nerves, too, seemed shattered. Snell rose.

"So you told! Why, I shot Garland for you, you yeller—" began Jett.

"You told yourself, you rat," Snell cut in hoarsely, "about my drilling that judge back in—"

They fired in unison, the bellow of Jett's big gun drowning the pygmy bark of Snell's derringer, and they fell dead together.

Tom Aberdeen and the Britches Kid sprang in through a window that opened upon the upstairs veranda, as Holloway and Joel Lunderford hurried in from the dark hall.

"Too late!" said the sheriff. "I thought we'd have time to stop—this. Fast? Whew! But if we hadn't let 'em have their guns, they'd 'a' been suspicious."

"They talked, and cleared me," said the owner of the Bar 88, "and that's what we was after. Jett sure was mad. He went up the stairs so fast that me and Track could hardly keep him in sight. In fact, it was hard to keep him in sight from the minute we let him get away with a gun. But we was sure that he'd come here to settle with Byrd as soon as he dared."

The sheriff faced the old cattleman.

"You can thank your boy for the whole thing. Makin' each one of 'em think that the other had told, and fakin' that note to upset Snell and get him poison mad, was the boy's idea.

"About half the town helped without knowin' it, but they'll know right soon, so you ought to make up with your son quick and take him home with you. Also, better give him a name and let him forget that 'Britches Kid' stuff. Your own name, Joel, would be fine. Old Joel, and young Joel. Right?"

It was not fear of what Mesquit Bluffs would say that caused the elder Lunderford to break. He broke because he was unable to be foolish longer. Hell, the Kid had loved *her* as much as his father had!

"Right," he said, and put out his hand. Young Joel clasped it. "Now let's ride for home, son. Come on, Track. Because the Bar 88 is home to you too, as long as you live."

Casa Grande Bullets

By

CHARLES M. MARTIN

Author of "MAVERICK MONEY," "DEUCE OF DIAMONDS," *etc.*

Boothill, Or Vengeance For The Cowardly Murder Of His Fellow Ranger? When Dick Hubbard Rode That Death Trail South Of The Rio Grande, He Knew It Was To Be One Or The Other . . .

"Make yore pass, lobo. Yore last one . . ."

Captain Dick Hubbard of the Arizona Rangers reined his tall roan into the shadows of a prickly pear thicket on the outskirts of Casa Grande. The crumbling ruins of America's first "Big House" frowned upon the two horse-backers who hunkered down on their boot-heels close to her adobe wall.

"Sorry to postpone yore wedding, Tucson," the tall captain muttered sympathetically. "But I got orders from the Capitol to get Sonora Pete Maxwell, and the instructions read 'Dead or Alive'!"

Tucson Bodie stared at the parched ground between his boots. His gray eyes were squinted with disappointment as he rolled a brown paper quirly. He started to flick a match with his thumb-nail, but stopped the movement abruptly to glance at the stern face of Dick Hubbard.

"Look, Cap," he suggested hopefully. "Sonora Pete hangs out in Casa Grande, across the line down there in Mexico. That dusty spot on the map yonder is Casa Grande in Arizona. You and me can't rightly cross the line!"

"He's in the *Estados Unidos*." Hubbard killed the hope aborning. "It was him and Hideout Crandall what robbed the bank in Tempe, and I got word that they were heading for Casa Grande. That tell you anything?"

Private Tucson Bodie nodded his red head. Both were dressed like the average Arizona cowboy in scarred bullhides and worn Levis, droopy wide-brimmed Stetsons cuffed back away from their ears, high-heeled bench-made boots, and checkered wool shirts. Long-barreled .45's were swung low and tied back on their right legs.

"Yeah," Tucson sighed. "It means them two are stoppin' off to celebrate on their way to the Border. We workin' together?"

Dick Hubbard shook his head. "Hideout knows me by sight," he answered slowly. "You take the Last Chance saloon, and I'll lope up to the end of the street and look in at the Miners' Rest. Either one of us can come foggin' if we hear any shootin'!"

Tucson Bodie levered erect and stuck out his hand. "If anything happens, take me to Bess over in Tempe," he growled huskily, and shook the heavy gun loose in his scabbard to make sure it wouldn't hang.

Dick Hubbard gripped the extended hand and slapped his companion heartily on the shoulder. "Snap out of it, Tucson," he bantered. "You and me has met the worst they got here in Arizona, and so far we've always taken 'em in. This time won't be no different!"

He hitched up his gun belt, swung to the saddle, and rode across the white sands in the blazing sun toward the sleepy town of Casa Grande, a mile away. Tucson Bodie stared at the broad back of his captain for a long moment. Then he climbed his horse and followed at a slow lope.

It was second drink time in the Last Chance when the ranger drew rein at the tie-rail and anchored his sorrel near the swinging doors. Tucson Bodie's gray eyes were somber as he shouldered through the batwings and jingled up to the bar. Four men were drinking at the far end, but they stopped their conversation to stare when Bodie crooked a finger and ordered his drink.

"Small beer," the ranger muttered.

The bartender drew the beer and wiped the edge of the glass with a thin stick to level the collar. As he placed the glass in front of Bodie and picked up the silver coin his lips barely moved.

"Watch Hideout!"

A six-gun roared from the end of the bar like a sudden sheet of heat lightning. A lock of black hair leaped from the head of the bardog, and he clapped a hand to the trickle of blood that ran down his pale fat face.

"Mebbe that will teach you not to whisper," a flat voice barked savagely.

Tucson Bodie pushed away from the bar and turned to face a big man who was blowing smoke from the muzzle of his gun.

"Reckon a gent can pass the time of day with a customer," Bodie said quietly.

"Second guess says yore handle is Sonora Pete Maxwell!"

"At yore service," the big hombre answered lazily, and holstered his gun. "Mebbe you was lookin' for me."

He was a big blocky-shouldered man of thirty-odd, with the look of a killer in his close-set black eyes. Cowhorn mustaches framed a leering mouth that had long canine teeth spiking at the corners like the tusks of a wolf. Two guns thonged low on his thick legs, and both grimy hands hooked in the crossed belts just over the whittled handles.

Tucson Bodie shifted his feet and talked against time. The thin jasper standing just behind Sonora Pete he knew to be Hideout Crandall, so called because of his ability to shake a hidden derringer down his sleeve into his waiting palm. Now Hideout licked his thin lips, his greenish eyes glowing with the lust to kill.

"Just come in for a beer," Bodie growled softly, and raised his glass. He drank deeply and placed the glass on the bar with his left hand without removing his eyes from the two bandits. "Reckon I'll roll along," he said carelessly, and started to turn toward the door.

"Roll hell!" Maxwell growled, and his hoarse voice sounded a warning. "You and yore pard rode into Casa Grande to get me and Hideout, so make yore play, you fiddle-footin' star-toter!"

His hands slapped down to his holsters and started to pull up. Tucson Bodie swiveled his wrist and made a pass with an uncanny speed that caught the big man flat-footed before his guns had cleared leather. Hideout Crandall shook his right arm and the sharp short bark of a .41 broke up the play. Tucson Bodie doubled in the middle and triggered a slug into the bar.

Sonora Pete grinned and completed his draw; sent two shots crashing across the saloon as his lips skinned back to show long lobo teeth. Tucson Bodie crumpled to the sawdust with the top of his head gone. The killer slid to the back door and spoke to Hideout Crandall.

"You know where to meet me. You left yore hoss out front, but it was me did that killin' in self defense!"

He was gone through the door and the thunder of hoofs rattled out back to mark his flight. Hideout Crandall shrugged and glared at the two men near the bar.

"You gents saw the play," he growled, and his right hand tapped the gun on his leg.

Fat Benson cringed back against the bar as the gunman stared at him. Hideout Crandall started for the door, and sneered at the huddle on the floor as he passed. He stopped abruptly when the doors ripped open and Dick Hubbard bucked through, empty-handed. The tall ranger skidded to a stop when he saw the body on the floor. Crandall leaned against the bar with a grinning sneer on his thin face.

"Tucson," the ranger whispered, but his voice cut through the powder smoke like a knife. "They got you, pard!"

He shuddered slightly at the terrible wounds in the top of Bodie's red head. Then his lips came together in a straight line, and he barked a question at Fat Benson without removing his eyes from Crandall.

"Who did it, Fat?"

The fat bardog twisted uneasily and wet his lips with a dry tongue that scraped like a snake in sand.

"Him and Pete Maxwell shot it out," he said hoarsely.

"Tucson was fast," Hubbard said slowly. "Where at's Pete Maxwell?"

"He dogged it after the killin'," the bartender whispered. "Through the back door."

"Yo're a liar," Crandall snapped. "Sonora Pete never dogged it from no man in his life!"

Fat Benson shivered and averted his eyes. Dick Hubbard stared at the two and took the play to save the bardog.

"You was here," he said to Crandall. "And I heard the bark of a .41 when I was down in the Miners' Rest!"

He walked slowly forward and stooped over the body of Tucson Bodie. His tanned face was craggy with anger when he levered back to his full six feet. He stared at Hideout Crandall with blue eyes that were smoky between slitted lids.

"Shot first through the middle with a .41 slug," he gritted. "And you always pack one up yore sleeve!"

"That's fightin' talk, mister," the killer muttered, falling into a crouch.

The ranger faced him, deadly quiet. His lips opened slightly to speak to Fat Benson behind the bar.

"Yo're a state's witness, Fat. Did this owl-shooter buy chips in that show-down game?"

Fat Benson writhed and twisted behind his bar. Hideout Crandall stared at him with a threat in his little green eyes. The bartender sagged until only his fat face was visible above the bar, and his answer came in a shivering gasp.

"Bodie beat Maxwell to the draw, and then Crandall bought in with his hideout!"

He dropped to the floor behind the bar before he had finished speaking. Dick Hubbard stared at Hideout Crandall, waiting, the flames leaping high in his blue eyes.

Hideout Crandall shrugged; then his right arm jerked down to spill the deadly derringer into his waiting palm. Dick Hubbard twitched his arm in the fastest draw of the high desert country, and thumbed two shots away as Crandall jerked up with the tiny .41.

No sign of mercy showed in that hard tanned face when the skinny gunman staggered back. Hideout Crandall took three fast steps backward before his brain sent its last message to a heart that had already stopped beating. Then the outlaw uncoiled like a worn rope and sagged to the sawdust, the derringer spilling from his hand. Calmly the ranger ejected the spent shells and thumbed full loads into the gate of his smoking Colt.

Stiff-legged he walked to the bar.

"Whiskey straight," he muttered.

Benson stood up on shaky legs and slid out bottle and glass. His glassy eyes stared fixedly at the body of Hideout Crandall until the stiff-faced ranger poured a brace of drinks and downed them neat.

"He had it comin'," he said slowly. "Pore Bess!"

Dick Hubbard jerked erect, wiped his lips with the back of his hand and sighed.

"His wedding night," he muttered, and his hard voice broke on the words. "And I promised Tucson the last thing that I'd take him back to Bess over in Tempe!"

"You can't do that, Dick," the bardog whispered hoarsely. "Sonora Pete ain't got ten minutes' start on yuh!"

"I ain't never broke my word up to now," Hubbard said slowly. He leaned over and pulled a canvas sack from the front of Crandall's dirty shirt. "Part of that Tempe bank loot," he said briefly, and pointed to the name on the sack.

"Gawd!" The bardog stared at the gold and greenbacks that cascaded out on the mahogany. "You got the evidence right in yore hand!"

Dick Hubbard took a deep breath and shoved the money in the front of his own shirt. "I made a promise," he said softly. "I got to take him back to Bess."

It was nearly midnight when a buckboard drew up in front of a rambling adobe ranch house a few miles south of Tempe. Old Cary Grant of the Circle-C came to the door with a sawed-off clutched in his gnarled hands.

"Quien es?" he called sharply.

"It's Dick Hubbard," the ranger answered quickly. "Bess home?"

"I'm here, Dick," a girl's voice called. "We was sitting up late waiting for Tucson. Please tell him to hurry in!"

Dick Hubbard climbed from the driver's seat, stomped up on the porch, and shoved through the door. He blinked his eyes against the light. Then he shuddered as the girl screamed a terrified question.

"Your face! You didn't bring Tucson back to me?" she cried.

Dick Hubbard swallowed and nodded his head.

"I brought him back like I promised," he whispered. "I'd rather have died, but he's—he's out there on the wagon!"

"On the wagon?" the old cattleman growled. "Not in it?"

"You mean—you mean he's wounded?" and the girl clutched the ranger's shoulders until her nails tore his skin.

"Tucson is dead, Bess," Hubbard muttered, and held the girl close when she fell against him.

"Dead," she whispered finally, her eyes staring blankly at the tall ranger. "And this was to be our wedding night. What happened? I can stand it now. Tell me, Captain!"

"Sonora Pete Maxwell and Hideout Crandall," Hubbard said. "Wanted for the robbery of the Tempe bank, and the killin' of three men. We heard they was headin' for Casa Grande, and Tucson met up with them in the Last Chance while I was searching the Miners' Rest."

The girl stared at him with brown eyes that never wavered. "In the Last Chance?" she prompted.

"It was showdown," Hubbard growled huskily. "Tucson beat Sonora to the draw, and then Crandall bought in with that damned hideout he always packed up his sleeve. He got Tucson through the middle, after which Sonora let loose with both cutters when Tucson doubled over!"

"And you brought Tucson back to Bess like you promised," old Cary added. "That means both them killers is rubbed out!"

The tall ranger shook his head slowly. "Hideout is dead," he corrected gruffly. "Maxwell dogged it, and right now he's on his way to Sonora."

"And you let him get away?" the old cattleman demanded.

"I made a promise to both Tucson and Bess," Hubbard said softly. "Now I got to go over and hand in my star!"

He spoke simply and without heroics. The old cattleman and his daughter stared unbelievingly. Captain Dick Hubbard fumbled with the star on his shirt and unfastened the pin. With a soft sigh he stuck the shield in his pocket.

"You can't do that, Dick," old Cary protested. "You got to get that killer!"

"Tucson was your pard," the girl whispered, choking back a sob.

"Yes'm," Hubbard nodded. "That's for why I'm turnin' in my star. I taken up for my pard; the best man a feller ever slept out under the stars with. Sonora Pete has gone to Mexico where the law of Arizona can't follow him."

The girl clutched his arm. "They'll kill you down there across the Border," she whispered. "Please don't go, Dick!"

"Got it to do, Bess," he answered. "Ridin' the lonesome trails like I do, I couldn't live with myself if I didn't square up for Tucson. I'm offerin' my sympathies to you, gal, but I brought him back like I promised!"

Old Cary Grant held out his hand and gripped hard. "Luck to you, feller," he muttered hoarsely. "I see you got yore roan hoss tied out behind that buckboard. Hit leather and get about yore gittin's, and

we'll take care of Tucson. Like the Mexes say: *Vaya con Dios!*"

Dick Hubbard walked down the steps like a man in a dream. He untied his *mecate* and climbed his saddle. As he rode into the darkness he whispered the wish of Cary Grant:

"Go thou with God!"

A tall sun-baked man on a great rangy roan rode into the sleepy little village of Hermosillo with the slanting rays of the setting sun. Alkali dust covered his worn clothing from high heels to big hat. A slow steady flame burned deeply in his narrowed blue eyes, and his brown right hand was never far from the heavy Colt thonged low on his rusty bullhides.

Dark-eyed men glanced up curiously from their *mescal* and *tequila* when the gaunt stranger pushed through the shuttered doors of the *Copo de Oro*. The cantina was enjoying a brisk trade, and Dick Hubbard hooked a heel over the shining brass rail and ordered his drink in Spanish.

Lines of grief and fatigue had etched deeply to mark his face with added years—and something else. The serape-clad Mexican drinkers stared curiously and nudged one another, but the tall *Americano* stared somberly into the bottom of his thin glass and paid them no heed. His drink stood untasted until he felt a gentle touch on his arm. He raised his smoky eyes while his head jerked briefly to one side.

"*Hola, capitan mio,*" a hearty voice greeted softly. "You are far from the land of your home, *amigo!*"

"It is so," Hubbard answered wearily, and shook hands with a slender officer in the uniform of the *rurales*. "I have been in the saddle for six long days."

"*Por que?*" the officer inquired and repeated the question in faultless English. "For why, my friend?"

"I ride with death, *Capitan* Jose," the ranger answered steadily.

"But you ride alone," the Mexican said, and raised his dark eyes in question. "Where then is the young *rangero* with the red hair? He who always shadowed you like your ghost?"

Dick Hubbard shuddered involuntarily. "That is right, Jose," he murmured. "Tucson died one week ago on the eve of his wedding. Shot down by bullets in the Casa Grande of my own country."

"*Simpatico* regrets," the Mexican murmured softly, and patted the American on the shoulder with gentle touch. "I liked that young one, and there was a time when he save the life of me."

Then his dark eyes lighted quickly with a flame of understanding. "You remove the badge of your office, my friend," he continued. "You tell me that you ride with death. And your right hand, Ricardo—never is it far from the gun on your right leg!"

"I resigned as an Arizona ranger, Jose," Hubbard explained briefly, and his deep voice carried a metallic undertone like the booming note of the bell in the mission on the hill that suddenly rang the hour of night.

Both men uncovered their heads and waited until the last mellow note had died away. The lips of the *rurale* moved silently in prayer while Dick Hubbard repeated his vow without speaking. The Mexican glanced up and caught the movement of those stiff lips, nodded his head in understanding.

"There was one who passed through here last night at twilight," he murmured. "An *Americano* who is called Sonora Pete Maxwell. We both seek this *Perro Lobo*, this wolf dog of your people!"

The tall American turned slowly and looked the Mexican squarely in the eyes. The *rurale* returned the gaze steadily while his hand rubbed the grip of his gun. Then he shrugged expressively and again held out his hand.

"As an officer, you have no calling in Mexico." His voice was a silky purr. "As the *companero* of my friend Tucson . . ." he smiled wistfully. "I will step aside, Ricardo, but listen you carefully."

"Gracias, amigo," the ranger murmured gratefully. "You was saying?"

"This Sonora Pete," the Mexican whispered. "Even now he makes the fiesta in the cantina of Juan Lopez in our Mexican Casa Grande. He spends *muchos dinero por vino y Señoritas.* What you call the women and wine. You are listen well, *capitan mio?"*

Dick Hubbard nodded slowly. "I hear you, Jose," he murmured. "That outlaw is cuttin' loose in the Casa Grande of yore country. Keep on talking!"

Only his blue eyes showed emotion, and they burned with the same slow fire that had been kindled when he had first looked upon the body of young Tucson Bodie. He sipped his *tequila* slowly while the soft voice of the Mexican droned in his ear.

"You will come with me and change the clothes," Jose continued. "You talk like the Mexican, but they would kill you at once if you go as you are. You will come with me to my *casa."*

Dick Hubbard frowned and then nodded agreement. "As you say, Jose," he muttered. "How far to Casa Grande?"

"Two hours by horse," the Mexican answered, as he led the way from the saloon. "There is one other matter," he added slowly.

"Spell it out, pard," Hubbard encouraged, watching the dark face under the shadow of the big sombrero. "You mean the reward?"

The *rurale* nodded. "My orders were to surround the cantina and bring him in . . . *muerto,"* he grated harshly. "What you *Americanos* call dead. Well?"

"The body is yours," the American agreed promptly. "And I won't be forgetting what I owe you, Jose!"

Candle lights were flickering in the low adobe houses when Dick Hubbard rode slowly up the dusty winding street of the Mexican town of Casa Grande. Rebosoclad women stared at his tall figure from under the lacy edges of silken mantillas. A black-frocked padre crossed himself devoutly and shook his head while his lips muttered, "That one rides with death, and soon the bells will be ringing!"

Dick Hubbard looked neither to the right nor left as he rode down the long dusty street. His eyes were fixed on the swinging doors of the brightly lighted cantina, and he swung down at the whittled rail and tied his horse with the hair *mecate.* He shifted his belt and twitched the heavy Colt loose in case of riding crimp. Then he pushed slowly into the saloon and eased his broad shoulders against the front wall while he winked the yellow light from his eyes.

The singing murmur of voices grew less and stopped abruptly when their owners saw the tall stranger, clad like themselves in bell-bottomed pantalones, with bolero jacket under a crimson *serape.* Tiny silver bells tinkled from the brim of his huge black sombrero. Lead-studded gunbelt contrasting with the crimson sash around his slim hips. Scarred scabbard thonged low told the silent story of the master gunman.

When the eyes of the tall stranger had accustomed themselves to the yellow light, he moved gracefully to the bar and ordered *tequila.* The bartender grinned when a gold coin rang on the bar.

"For the house," Hubbard murmured in Spanish.

Eager *paisanos* crowded up and named their drinks when the bartender made the announcement.

Sonora Pete Maxwell was the last to leave the back room, and he dumped a half-clad girl from his knee when he levered to his feet with a scowl on his dark face. He pushed his way through the crowd and stopped to face the stranger five paces

away. His voice rapped out in Spanish:

"Keep your money, hombre!"

Dick Hubbard raised his eyes slowly and stared at the killer. *"Por que, no, señor?"* he murmured. "I have ridden many weary miles and, like you see, I do the honors."

"Sonora Pete, that's me," the killer bragged loudly. "Take back your *dinero* and drink on me!"

Dick Hubbard shrugged, and the brilliant *serape* fell away to show the heavy gun on his right leg. "But no," he answered softly. "Perhaps another time."

The little black eyes of the killer shifted down to stare at the heavy gun. His loose mouth split wide to show the wolf fangs gleaming like yellow ivory in the corners.

"There won't be no other time," he contradicted flatly. "Just who might you be, stranger?"

Dick Hubbard shrugged. "I might be the *rurale,"* he said, and his face was craggy and cold. "Hold," he continued, when the killer dropped his hand to the gun on his leg. "I am not of the *policio,* and I have a story to tell. You would like to hear, my friends?"

DARK eyes shifted nervously to the scowling face of Sonora Pete. Then a slim *caballero* smiled, and the crowd took courage.

"Proceed, *señor,"* he bowed to the ranger. "This story you mentioned?"

"Me, I have the friend who I love like a brother," Hubbard began, in Spanish, his eyes on Sonora Pete as he talked. "Many nights we ride under the stars. There was a girl. So pretty was she, *amigos;* hair like the *Copa de Oro,* like a wonderful cup of gold; brown eyes like those of a fawn—eyes that laughed happily when she spoke of her lover. *Comprende, señors?"*

"We understand," the slender *ranchero* answered softly. "Me, I am to wed such a *señorita* myself on the eve of tomorrow."

Dick Hubbard closed his eyes against the light for a moment. "I wish you good fortune, *señor,"* he murmured. "You are young like my friend was young, and he was taken away from us on the day of his wedding."

Dark eyes glowed with sympathy. Only Sonora Pete sneered and drank noisily.

"You loved the girl yourself," he declared harshly. "That gives you better than an even chance to get her now!"

Dick Hubbard drew a deep breath, and for a moment the flame leaped high in his blue eyes. Then he controlled himself.

"You perhaps are of that breed," he answered coldly.

"Meaning what, stranger?" Maxwell demanded harshly.

Dick Hubbard shrugged and waved his left hand carelessly. "Later, *señor,"* he murmured. "But first the story."

"Continue, my friend," the slender *ranchero* said in a soft whisper. "How then was your friend . . ."

"Yes, he was killed," Hubbard said sharply. "Just before he rode away from me, he made me promise to take him back to the girl he loved if anything happened. I took his dead body to her. She is disconsolate until she hears that her lover has been avenged."

SONORA PETE shifted restlessly and leaned forward to study the face of the tall stranger. "You ain't no spic," he said in English. "Yo're *Americano* the same as me!"

"American, but not the same as you," Hubbard corrected. "I always give a man fair warning when I intend to kill him!"

The crowd studied the pair with open curiosity now. The slender *ranchero* interpreted the conversation for them. Then they moved quickly away from the bar, and Sonora Pete smiled with satisfaction.

"Get it told," he grunted. "I got more time than you have!"

"Pardone mio, señors," Hubbard apologized, and continued to speak in Spanish. "My friend is dead. He came upon a wolf

and coyote, and the lobo started a fight. Then the coyote shot one time when Señor Bodie was watching the wolf. Through the middle, *señors,* after which the *perro lobo* shoot my friend two times through the head!"

There was no sound except the sucking of breath into laboring lungs. Sonora Pete growled deep in his chest and shoved away from the bar. His little black eyes glittered and his yellow wolf fangs showed.

"I know you now," he spat with open contempt. "Yo're that damn lawman they call Dick Hubbard, captain of the Arizona Rangers!"

"The same," Hubbard answered softly. "Tucson will rest easy tonight, you damn wolf dog!"

"This is Mexico." A gleam of triumph glowed in the eyes of the killer. "You rangers ain't the law here."

"I resigned from the rangers before I left Bess Grant." Dick Hubbard's voice was a brassy threat. "I would have followed you clear to the Argentine, because I taken up for my pard!"

Sonora Pete Maxwell jerked his shaggy head. "If Hideout was here . . ." he began, his voice a snarl.

"Hideout is dead," Hubbard barked swiftly. "And he died the same way Tucson Bodie did."

Not a sound was there in the cantina save for guttering of the fat candles. The two Americans faced each other in front of the sloppy bar, eyeing one another like savage animals getting ready to spring.

"Hideout was my pard," Maxwell said softly, "and you killed him on a sneak. I told you once before you didn't have long to live!"

"And I remarked that my kind always give the man they intend killing a fair chance," Hubbard retorted softly. "Make yore pass, *lobo.* Yore last one!"

The big outlaw shifted his feet for balance, while his tongue licked his drooling lips. His big right hand shadowed the gun on his leg. Then he struck down like a rattler, so fast that none saw his hand move under the flickering lights.

Dick Hubbard twitched the shoulder muscles in his right arm. His hand blurred down with fingers clawed to fit the worn handle of his gun. Smooth metal hissed against worn leather while calloused thumb was earing back the filed hammer. His tall lean frame was outlined briefly in the muzzle bloom that blossomed full-blown at the end of his spiking gun. Then the light was snuffed out by black-powder smoke of the double explosion that bucked the gun in his hand.

Sonora Pete Maxwell was heavy enough to take the shock without giving back a step. Two black dots leaped to the center of his forehead. His mouth dropped open, and his reflexes drove a slug into the floor between his polished boots.

Silence hung over the crowded cantina for the count of three ticks of a clock. Then the killer swayed forward and crashed down to the dirty sawdust. Dick Hubbard expelled breath and reached for the untasted glass of *tequila.* Deep-toned bells chimed softly from the mission on the hill, and every man removed his hat until the last note had died away.

"It is finished, *amigo,*" a soft voice said from the swinging doors. The American turned to face Jose Cortez. "*El Lobo* is dead, and I extend to you the thanks of my government. Señor Bodie died from the bullets of Casa Grande, and his killer . . ."

"He died from the same cause, *capitan.*" Hubbard murmured. "I loaded my gun in that other saloon up across the border. Loaded it with Casa Grande bullets!"

They shook hands soberly and the ranger turned to the door. "You go now?" the *rurale* asked. "You return to your own country?"

The ranger nodded. "I promised to tell Bess," he explained simply. "Right now she's waiting to hear."

From the burning cabin leaped the three enemies of the Maverick's gang, their guns answering the outlaws' fire.

Lightning in Levis

By

HARRY F. OLMSTED

Author of "Through the Smoke," "Code of the Lawless," *etc.*

CHAPTER I
The Cheyenne Killer

It was Laramie La Forge's boast that his Cowskin Saloon was the saltiest honka-tonk from the Dominion line to the Sweetwater. Nor would anybody argue the point with him. Located on the north bank of the Missouri River at the old Cowskin Crossing, the saloon catered to the wild youngsters who convoyed the long-horn herds from Texas, the reckless bloods who followed the gold strikes, and the tight-lipped gentry who might be anything from

Slayer Brett, Orneriest Gunfighter Who Ever Slapped Leather, And The Spindly Kid With The Oversized Smokepole Were Odd Trail Mates. But With The Help Of That Tall Stranger Known As Lightnin' Rod, They Played A Fast Game And A Sure One When They Tangled With The Bushwhacking Outlaws In Whiskey Barrel Meadow

badge toters to train robbers. Laramie wasn't choosy so long as a patron paid his way.

A lot of ugly tales were told about this tough log resort in the Montana badlands. Most of them were true. But lawmen in adjoining counties were not overly interested in these yarns—for very good reasons. Most of those who had shown such interest in the past were dead.

It was freely spoken over the bars of Glasgow, Fort Benton and the Falls that Laramie La Forge was the master wolf of a ravening badlands pack. But to prove that statement was something else again.

On this particular night the Cowskin Saloon was living up to its reputation. The place was bright with lights. An itinerant saloon bum hammered at an off-key piano. The short bar was banked with a motley crew of maudlin drunks. Games flourished, their pots sweetened by money

that burned the pockets of a Texas trail outfit, lately paid off at the Sub Agency. Painted harpies wandered about chattering with the patrons of the place.

Into this festive turmoil stepped a stranger. Only Laramie La Forge, from his vantage point at the bar end, saw the new arrival step across the threshold and pause. The saloon owner straightened and stared. Though he was used to dealing with hard customers, even he was forced to gasp at the patent toughness of this man. He was tall, very tall, and a little stooped. He wore two long-barreled Colts tied down to his slender thighs, and his gangling arms were angled at the elbows as if in readiness for the gun snatch.

His eyes, shaded by a floppy, disreputable Stetson, were deep-set coals. Beneath his predatory nose, a wide gash of a mouth was parted in a coldly sneering smile that showed snaggy, uneven teeth. A mop of black hair hung over one eye.

The stranger's ferret eyes swept the room, coming to rest at last upon Laramie himself. He seemed to snarl, stirred himself and swaggered up to the bar. There he ordered whiskey and three glasses. Very carefully he poured three full drinks, put his hand to his lips and uttered a shrill Indian war whoop.

The piano player ended his tune in a clashing discord. Gamblers paused in their play. Drinkers set down their glasses to stare in amazement at the stranger, who braced himself back to the bar as he raised one of the three glasses. His voice, a flat, toneless sneer, struck to the farthest corners of the silent barroom.

"Gents," he gibed. "Here's to the fiercest grizzly in all the mountains! Here's to the deadliest rattler in all the deserts! Here's to the o'neriest bull buffler in all the plains!

"Here's to the ranicky jigger that's all o' them things rolled into one hide, the pizen-fanged gunnie who made Wild Bill eat crow meat an' whose draw makes lightnin' look like a turtle! Here's to the drinkin'est, fightin'est, killin'est jasper that ever slapped gun leather fer a blood lettin'! Drink hearty!"

He gulped the whiskey, banged down the glass, and grinned tauntingly. Laramie La Forge scowled, knocked the ash off his cigar, and signed to the shotgun lookout to look alive.

"We're interested, stranger," he barked. "Who is this scary silvertip that scratches his mark in the tallest trees? Name him."

The stubble-faced stranger flashed him a crooked grin. "Same bein' Slayer Brett, gents! Knowed far an' knowed wide as the Cheyenne Killer! He takes 'em on singly or in gangs. Gunblasts is his sweetest music an' fillin' graveyards is his passion. Strong men shudder at his name an' his shadder is a terror to wimmen an' children."

"Where's he at?"

"Right here in the Cowskin Saloon. Feast yore eyes, gents!" He swelled his chest. "Yo're lookin' straight at Slayer Brett!"

An unconvincing laugh ran through the barroom as Slayer Brett picked up his second drink.

"Now gents," he chortled, "drink deep to Montana's longest legged coyote! Swaller yore rotgut to a wolf-snarlin', buzzard-hearted, skunk-striped bushwhacker who shoots from the brush an' makes himself scarcer than money. A man slick an' sly as a dog-fox, lower'n a snake's belly an' a scairt rabbit fer runnin', or I'm the two biggest liars in Montana.

"Drain yore glasses to a hairpin that's never been branded by a hot slug, a gent who'll damp the fires o' hell with his skunk-stink when I shoot a nice line o' buttonholes up an' down his brisket! Bottoms up!"

"Such as who, neighbor?" drawled Laramie La Forge.

"Such as the Maverick!" snapped Slayer

Brett, and a sigh seemed to lift from the wide-eyed patrons. "The lousy hellbender who shot my pardner to lace. Yeah, the Maverick—th' lowest, yellowest dog that ever called himself a man! When I find him, I'm spittin' in his teeth an' makin' his wives widders. Tell him that!"

The last murmur and buzz had quieted. Reckless, sullen eyes watched him. From all the sign, no one could doubt that Slayer Brett had said the wrong thing. But it seemed not to trouble him. Picking up his third glass, he faced them again. He smirked as he saw that Laramie had straightened stiffly, that his sallow pallor had given way to a leprous gray.

"An' last but not least, my friends," the Cheyenne Killer growled, "I give you a toast to a grave! The coldest, wettest, wormiest grave in all my private buryin' grounds. But still too comfortable a grave fer the one it's shore goin' to hold."

"Whose grave?" La Forge's voice was a snarl.

"The Maverick's grave, gents!" Slayer Brett's eyes shuttled to the door, glimpsed two staring eyes and a pinched face. His hand crept closer to his holsters as he finished. "I'm puttin' the Maverick away —now!"

As he tossed down the third glass of liquor, a hissing sound swept through the room. He had drunk these same toasts in many saloons, but nowhere with quite the same effect as here. Slayer Brett set down his glass and spun a coin on the counter. Then he glanced toward the door.

Coming toward him was a slip of a boy who might have been sixteen, but who looked younger. His underfed thinness was accentuated by the clothes he wore—threadbare duds that had certainly been gleaned from some junk pile.

His Levis hung on his spindly legs in folds, held up by a nail thrust through a huge tuck at the waist. His boots, mismatched and many sizes too large, dragged as he walked. Each step was tolled off by the chime of dragging rusty spurs. He sidled crab-like as he walked, his right hand held near the butt of an enormous cap-and-ball Colt. Pale and haggard, he stared unwinkingly at Slayer Brett.

From Laramie La Forge came an angered bellow.

"Goober Thoms, you get outa here. I've told you before and I'll not be tellin' you again. Now git!"

Slayer Brett smiled thinly.

"Let him alone, feller!" he ordered. "I'm invitin' the kid to have a drink with me. What'll yuh have, kid?"

A snarl burst from the boy's lips. "Drinkin' nothin'—with you!" he rasped thinly. "Or with ary other man I'm settin' forth to kill!"

No one laughed. No one but Slayer Brett. And his chuckle wasn't convincing. The Cheyenne Killer seemed suddenly to have changed. The confident smirk was gone and his eyes had puckered to slits.

"Kill me, Kid?" he queried. "Fer what? Far as I know, I've never seen you before in my life."

"You ain't, Slayer," the boy said, without rancor or any material lessening of his deadliness. "But you give up a heap o' head about the Maverick . . ."

"Him bein' a friend o' yores, I take it," Slayer Brett murmured leadingly. A look of hate flooded the boy's pinched face.

"Me? Not on yore tintype, neighbor. But he's my meat! Mine, you understand, an' that don't mean nobody else. You or no other man. You claim to be a gun fighter. Well, I'm calling yore bluff! Draw, damn yuh!"

Slayer Brett shook with silent laughter. "Main thing, son," he said placatingly, "is to get the killin' done an' the grave filled. But you . . ." he looked the ragged youngster up and down, "you look sorta young to be—"

"If I'm fast enough," gritted Goober,

"I'm big enough. An' if I'm big enough, I'm old enough."

"Shore yuh are. But I was wonderin' how a beardless kid like you would go about nailin' the Maverick to the cross."

"I'll nail him! I know where he's holin' an' I'm goin' up there."

"Why don't yuh?"

"Well . . . er . . . I'm afoot," admitted

the youngster, ruefully. "One o' these days I'm stealin' me a hawss an' then—"

"Suppose I was to buy you a pony an' we was to do that killin' together? Fastest gun brings home the bacon."

The boy's face softened and he searched the killer's eyes as if to ferret out any guile there might be hiding there. Satisfied, he relaxed.

"Yuh mean," he questioned, "that you'd side me killin' the skunk that killed my dad? That me an' you . . ."

"Why not, Kid? Tell me where the Maverick holes an' we'll be on our way."

"Gosh . . . that's easy. Him an' his men hide away in—"

"Goober!" bellowed Laramie. "Shut that gabbin' mouth o' yores an' clear out of here before I—"

". . . him an' his men," continued the boy, "hide away in . . ."

From somewhere in the crowd a gun blast set the lights to jumping on their wicks. Goober Thoms gasped, rose to his toes, spun and chinned the floor.

Swift as was that cowardly interruption, it was no more sudden than the subsequent movements of Slayer Brett. His hands blurred at his sides. Two guns leaped to his fingers as his straining ears caught Goober's mumbled finish. ". . . in Whiskey Barrel Meadow . . . Little Rockies . . ." Then the Cheyenne Killer was rocking the hammers of his leveled pieces.

One slug took the man with the smoking gun in the chest, driving him against the wall and down it to the floor. Another bullet singed the hand of the lookout, as he started his draw. A third went back over his shoulder to buzz past the ear of the bartender, as that worthy lifted his bung-starter.

Then, following the lead of the Texas trail hands, the patrons were reaching toward the ceiling. Laramie and his lookout joined them. The killer's voice came low and deadly.

"Reach, you boy-killin', back-shootin' polecats! Claw fer the roof! Now herd, damn yuh, an' belly to the wall!" He backed to a corner, his two guns weaving menacing circles before him. Then he grinned icily at the tall ramrod of the Texans. "You, Whang Strip! Rip off that purty yella neck scarf an' bag the game banks! Careful! An' while yo're doin' so, kick in with yore herd roll I know yo're totin'. Steady an' careful! First jasper that feels lucky, I'll shoot off his ears an' make his babies orphants."

He had them cowed and they obeyed him. Now, from the hand of the trail boss, he took the scarf-bound money and sent him back to the stretching wall. For one fleeting instant his brittle glance strayed to the sprawled, silent form of Goober Thoms. His eyes softened momentarily, and then he was the chill and deadly killer from Cheyenne again. On cat feet he slid to the portal, pausing there a second to fling them a rasping taunt.

"Sorry to interrupt business, boys! But you're getting off easy, everything considered. I'll bid you all good-night, you boy-killin' skunks. If you Texans want yore herd money, you'll find it somewhere in Whiskey Barrel Meadow. Try an' get

it! An' the same to you, Mister Laramie La Forge."

Then he was outside, flinging himself astride his fast pony and sending three warning shots rattling through the door. Cruel spurs made his mount wheel and rear. Slayer Brett roared into the night, his wild yell giving mocking answer to the lead hurled from the rear door of the Cowskin. The Cheyenne Killer was riding swiftly toward the Little Rockies and a surprise rendezvous with the Maverick.

CHAPTER II
Laramie's Texas Posse

There was bedlam in the Cowskin Saloon following Slayer Brett's departure. Patrons of the games clamored for the money they had lost in the hold-up. The percentage girls were huddled in one corner, pallid with fear as they stared at the bodies of Goober Thoms and the man who had shot him. The house gamblers stood in a silent and uncomfortable knot, anxiously awaiting the return of Laramie and the Texans from their fruitless gun slinging.

La Forge came stomping inside with smoking gun and raging temper. With him was the burly lookout and two other of his personal bodyguards. After them straggled the eleven Texas trail men, silent and angry at the loss of three months' work. Someone told La Forge that his gunman against the wall was dead. He showed no concern. But when advised that he had lost five thousand dollars from the games, he cursed slowly and heavily. When the tall ramrod of the Texans admitted the loss of something under thirty thousand dollars, Laramie's eyes flickered. He seemed to regain his composure.

"Heavy," he addressed his lookout, "you ever hear of a feller name of Slayer Brett, from down around Cheyenne way?"

"No!" muttered Heavy. "I never heard of Slayer Brett or no other such jigger."

"Then," announced the saloonman, "Slayer Brett ain't his real name. Who you reckon he can be? Cripes! I looked right at that draw an' didn't see nothin'."

"Them kind of draws is few an' far between," opined the lookout sagely. "You can count Montana's fast ones on the fingers of yore hands. There's Kid Howard an' Long Ben Kilpatrick . . ."

"Sa-a-a-ay!" La Forge's eyes narrowed. "You don't think . . .?"

"Why not, Laramie? I told you at the time it wasn't no smart move leavin' Wild Bunch sign on that Landusky stage job. An' that was even before you got word that Butch Cassidy was payin' off the guilty party when the sign come right."

"I mind," nodded Laramie, troubled. "Then you think Slayer Brett is . . ."

"Long Ben Kilpatrick! He's got the height an' he's got the draw. God knows he's mean enough, an' as fer the good looks he's supposed to have, I know the snaggle teeth of Slayer Brett was nothin' but tooth colorin'. I ain't so shore but if he was spruced up he mightn't be a pretty good lookin' feller. Kilpatrick is my guess."

"Then that means he wasn't funnin' none when he said he was headed into the Meadow."

"Why should he be funnin'?"

"Oh-h-h-h, I was just thinkin' mayhap he might only be a travelin' hold-up artist. In which case he'd try to start us up a blind trail. Ben Kilpatrick . . . humph." His eyes blazed with an ugly light.

"I think yo're right, Heavy. I believe that was Ben Kilpatrick. In which case his outfit was hangin' around outside to see he got away with it. Meanin' too that the Wild Bunch will be roarin' into Whiskey Barrel Meadow before daylight. Well, we'll go in after him!"

"There ain't enough of us to do no good," complained the gunman. "Only four all told, beside what's in the Meadow. An' the Wild Bunch will likely hip them . . . fast.

No tellin' how many guns Kilpatrick will strike with. You know I'm allus hungry for a good gun scrap, but . . ."

"Don't worry, Heavy," Laramie smiled thinly. "You'll stay here with Gundog and Skeeter, to watch the Cowskin. I'll make out with the help I've got." He turned to the tall Texan. "Tex," he drawled, familiarly. "That gunnie taken you for real important money. How are you for gettin' it back?"

"I gotta get it back," growled the trail boss. "It ain't mine. Where the hell can a man find this Whiskey Barrel Meadow?"

"I'll show yuh," grinned the saloonman. "Fact is, I'll take you right to it an' get you past the guards. It'll likely mean warmin' yore irons against that hellacious Wild Bunch, but from what I hear you Texicans ain't choosy when it comes to gun slingin'."

"None at all. When do we start?"

"Now! Aprons!" He waved to the bartender. "Bust out a pint o' fightin' likker for each o' these boys."

While the 'keep was setting up the bottles, Goober Thoms stirred, sighed and lifted his head from the floor. His eyes were half dazed, a red crease ran along the side of his head. As he lifted himself to an elbow one of the Texans knelt beside him.

"H'are yuh, button?" he grinned, and dabbed at the bullet cut with his bandanna. "Narrow squeak fer you, wasn't it? We figgered you was dead."

"Too tough to kill," murmured the youngster. "That dirty yella belly shot me when I wasn't lookin'."

"An' got his needin's before you hit the floor, Kid," chuckled the tall, pug-nosed cowboy. "He died nice."

"Slayer Brett . . . dead?" The boy looked around, staring with awed eyes at the huddled body yonder by the wall. "Who . . . who downed him? Was it you?"

The cowboy shook his head as he bound the bandanna about the youngster's skull.

"Slayer Brett done the shootin', Kid," he confessed. "Cripes, what a draw. When yonder dry-gulcher put a slug through you to keep you from namin' the hole-up of the Maverick, Slayer laid him like a rug. Whee-ew! Fastest gun hand ever I saw, an' I've seen 'em all."

"Gosh," murmured the boy. "Gosh! I thought he out-talked me an' then shot me. There's a gun pardner fer yuh, feller. Sidin' yuh when you need him worse. Where's Slayer now?"

"He stuck up the house an' sloped fer Whiskey Barrel to smoke out the Maverick! Us, we're goin' yonderly to be in on the hangin' when they stretch his neck."

The boy's face twisted. "Don't," he pleaded. "Please don't, cowboy. Hell, he's a right jasper. What if he did rob this hell dump? What do you care? He ain't hurt you none."

"Only thirty thousand dollars' worth," grinned the cowboy. "No, button, I reckon tonight is the last time folks will ever hear of Slayer Brett."

"C'mon, George," called the tall ramrod. "Le's go."

"Comin'!" called the one ministering to the Kid. "Don't you worry about nothin', Goober," he advised, helping the unsteady youngster to his feet. "You go on home an' have yore maw fix up this scratch. Good huntin'." Then he was gone.

Whooping enthusiastically, the Texan followed Laramie outside and the thunder of hoofbeats struck through the saloon walls, receding swiftly toward the north. Goober stood braced against the bar, looking after them, his pinched face clouded, his eyes burning coals. Slayer Brett had robbed the saloon and ridden to kill the Maverick, they had said. And now Laramie was leading the Texans to trap the Cheyenne Killer between two fires and rub him out.

A shudder ran through the youngster. Brett was only doing what the Kid himself had planned to do—when the sign was right

to steal a horse. And, in doing it, to avenge the death of his father—a rough, tough freighter whose business was done principally with shady gentry, and who had staggered into his badlands cabin with the dying statement that the Maverick had killed him.

Goober's nostrils quivered. By all the signs he knew the time was ripe for him to steal that horse and take the many cutoffs to the Little Rockies that none knew better than he. Maybe he could beat Slayer Brett to the Meadow. If not, he could at least side Brett against Laramie and his Texas posse.

The boy's eyes ran around the room. "Home," he murmured, with biting sarcasm. "He said fer me to go home. Well, home's where I spread my soogins. So, I'll be goin' . . . home."

A little unsteadily, he walked to the door and out. With no hesitation he moved to the rack, untied the first pony at hand, climbed into the saddle and jabbed home his rusty spurs. At a high lope, he bore off to the east, heading for a dim and bee-line trail to Whiskey Barrel Meadow. Hoping against hope to be there as soon as or sooner than Slayer Brett, the Cheyenne Killer.

CHAPTER III

Through the Bunghole

Knowing that every mile he gained on pursuit from Cowskin Crossing helped the odds in his favor, Slayer Brett roweled his pony mercilessly. His way led along a well-beaten trail that followed the windings of the east fork of Cowskin Creek and so into the foothills at the east toe of the Little Rockies.

He had never been inside the outlaw hideaway known as Whiskey Barrel Meadow. But, like most men of his kind, he knew the things that needed knowing. He knew the way into the place. The way out would be something entirely different and a lesson to be learned in the smoke of gnashing guns.

The trail wound along the murmuring watercourse and through scrub timber, green and shadowy and gorged with rustlings. From the east came searching fingers of moonlight that flung spectral patterns over the dark slopes. Slouched in the saddle, apparently half asleep, Slayer Brett held his mount to the stiff pace. Yet the practiced wariness that had ordered his life was unallayed. Otherwise he would not have heeded the tugging uneasiness that seemed to breathe a warning.

Now the Cheyenne Killer tensed, stiffened in the saddle. Little tremors ran along his spine as a vague shadow detached itself from the gloom ahead. His pony blew a warning blast through its nostrils, flung its ears forward and curvetted nervously.

A cloud bank in the east obscured the moon and Slayer Brett's gun freighted holsters were a mighty comfort at his thighs. He stirred the half-frightened animal with the spurs, edging forward. A gun glittered and a voice, icily compelling, spoke from the gloom.

"Reach!" it commanded. "An' be damn' careful what you reach for!"

Like all real gunfighters, the Cheyenne Killer was never one to wilfully defy the drop. He seldom drew a gun unless it was to kill; never drew one unless the sign and the odds were favorable. Now a little laugh dribbled across his lips. Slayer Brett was one of the breed who can laugh as they destroy. His voice was low, controlled.

"You tell it right convincin', neighbor," he purred. "But now that I'm reachin', what'll I do? Jerk down a flock of sky fer yuh?"

"Hold it like you are, Smart-alick! Who are yuh an' where at you headin'?"

"Me?" Brett chuckled. "They call me

Slayer Brett, the Cheyenne Killer. I'm lookin' fer a place to light."

"Place to light? Such as how, feller?"

"A hideaway! While the storm blows over."

"What storm is that?"

Slayer Brett's eyes glittered with guile. "The cyclone stirred up by the trail outfit I chivvied out of thirty thousand dollars. An' by the saloonman I bumped fer his game banks."

"Thirty thousand dollars, eh?" The man laughed unconvincingly. "Talk on, feller. You interest me a heap with them big figgers. Slayer Brett . . . humph! Never heard the name. Where'd all these things happen . . . an' when?"

"Tonight," laughed Brett. "In the Cowskin Saloon. You know, Laramie La Forge's place. You ought to have seen Laramie's face as I backed out of his dump. Ha, ha, ha!"

The man took up Slayer's mirth, his laughter echoing from the hemming headlands, seemingly convulsed until the killer's sharp query sobered him.

"What's so funny?" Brett snapped.

The other's laughter died away. "So you stuck up the Cowskin?"

"Like I told yuh."

"An' now yo're lookin' fer a place to hide from Laramie, eh?"

"Yeah. Till the smoke settles."

"Oh-h-h-h, good cripes. Ho, ho, ha, ha! You'll be the death of me yet, feller. Kin you eemagine? He holds up the Cowskin an' then runs into Laramie's own hole-up to hide away. Ho, ho! An' tells his story to one o' Laramie's own men. Ha! Got that money with you, Mister Slayer Brett?"

"Every last cent of it. Why?"

His captor's mirth gave way to snarling deadliness. "That's all I wanta know. Keep reachin' an' gig yore pony up here to me! As you pass, I'll glaum yore guns. Then you'll rein into yonder Bunghole, across the crick. I'll show you a hideaway as is one. Then you'll have a chance to look at another one o' Laramie's faces soon as we can get him up here. If my guess ain't off, you'll get the safest kind of a hidin' place . . . three by six in the wormy ground! Watch them hands now an' come straight to me."

The man's every inflection stirred tides of warning in Slayer Brett's veins. A little more deadly than he had been before, the Cheyenne Killer touched his pony with the steel. With the inborn astuteness of those who live with the Dark Shadow at their elbows, he read murder in the man's voice, and promise of a bullet in the back as soon as his guns were drawn.

"Yuh mean," he pretended to gasp, "that Laramie rods a outlaw hangout up here?"

"Whiskey Barrel Meadow!" chuckled the trail guard. "An' the wildest bunch o' gunnies in Montana. An' you rode right into it."

Now it was Slayer Brett's turn to laugh. Peal on peal he loosed to the skies as he moved slowly toward the gun guard. "Funniest thing ever I heard of," he roared. "It shore is a joke on me."

Even as the last word cleared his teeth, he was moving. Apparently he was doubled across the neck of his pony with mirth. Then his hands flashed, the left to the saddle horn, the right to a big Colt.

The swift crash of guns started ugly echoes. The guard was shooting at an almost hidden target; Slayer Brett was firing underneath his pony's neck. The guard's pony reared and its rider fell backward to clump soddenly into the trail.

The renegade's pony went thundering wildly down the trail. Slayer Brett swung down to lug the fallen guard into the brush and out of sight. There was no need to tie and gag him. Burial was all he needed now.

The Cheyenne Killer mounted again, turned across the creek and entered the narrow break in the cliff face. For a mat-

ter of half a mile, he reined his horse up a narrow defile with sharply boxed sides. Then the little gorge suddenly widened, breaking out into a broad meadow, lush with grass and water growth, dotted with grazing horses and cattle . . . Whiskey Barrel Meadow.

Yonder, where the talus sloped down from the cliffs to the left, loomed the dark bulk of a cluster of log cabins. There were lights in those cabins, lights that gave Slayer Brett momentary pause. Doubt assailed him. Had the renegades heard those shots? Or were they, like most of their breed, early risers? He looked at his watch. Four o'clock in five minutes. Dawn would soon break over the eastern hills.

A grim smile twisted Slayer Brett's face as he reined his pony into the brush, dismounted and tied the beast. It gave him a fierce sort of pleasure to know that Laramie La Forge was tied up with the Maverick, just as rumor had said. Well, he'd pay the Maverick a call. And when he had settled with that worthy, he'd see if Laramie came to the trap he had baited.

Striding into the trail, Slayer Brett paused to listen. Behind him was the threat of those who had surely followed him from the Cowskin. Ahead was his rendezvous with death. He fingered his guns and his mouth was taut and deadly, his eyes pools of bitterness.

Now he was sliding toward the cabins, moving like a wraith in the soft moonglow. Taking advantage of every bit of shadow, he searched for other outposts. Skirting the first of two darkened cabins, he moved to the rear wall of the first lighted one. His nose was stung by the aromatic taint of wood smoke, the odors of boiling coffee and frying bacon. Voices rumbled through the damp log walls. But there was nothing in the words that interested the Cheyenne Killer. He moved on to the next cabin. Then to the next.

At the third cabin fragments of talk came to his ears that made him straighten and loosen his guns in their leathers. Noiselessly he moved around to the front, paused in the doorway to look the ground over, then surged against the closed panel. It swung open. When he kicked the door shut behind him, his gun was covering two men who hunkered with frying pans before an open blaze in the fireplace.

Tall, dark and muscled like a cougar,

the Maverick dropped his utensil and rose. Crouching, his hand plummeted to his holster. Whitey Vorse, as snaky a killer as ever threw leg across a cantle, matched the move. But on more mature thought, neither elected to defy the intruder's drop.

Maverick, whom men charged with being the most heartless renegade ever to track the bluestem ranges, stood stiff, pale, his face working strangely as he stared at the silent man at the door. In his snapping black eyes was the reflection of instant recognition and a roweling fear. Whitey Vorse, a cutbank killer, whom Slayer Brett had recognized at first glance, shrank back against the stone front of the fireplace, his eyes slitted and unwinking.

With something between a sigh and sob the Maverick relaxed and jerked out an uncomfortable laugh.

"Don't forget yore manners, Whitey," he reproved. "Git on with breakfast. We've got company, it seems. Set, friend. Take a load off yore feet an' a little pressure off that trigger. I'll pour you a drink while Whitey stirs the slum."

"Thanks, Maverick." Slayer Brett's voice was flatly final. "I never drink durin' business hours an' it's a little early

fer my breakfast appetite. Go right ahead with yore meal. Me, I'd like to chin you some."

"Hop to it, feller. What they callin' yuh now? An' what's the nature of yore wau-wau?"

"Slayer Brett, the Cheyenne Killer! An' what I've got to say will roll freer if Whitey cooks his breakfast in another cabin."

Whitey turned puzzled eyes to the Maverick. "What the hell, feller?" he snarled, and his gunhand moved. The Maverick managed a smile. "It's all right, Whitey. I didn't tell the boys that I was sendin' fer Slayer. He's an old friend o' mine, and one of the rootin'est, shootin'est gunnies I know. He'll fit here like a glove. Go on down with the boys; I'll be down directly."

The gunman nodded, set down his skillet and shuffled past the intruder with a sullen glance. When he was outside Slayer Brett jerked in the latch string. Deliberately he holstered his gun and moved toward the man for whom he had come. A thin smile was on his lips. The two men studied each other silently. And, strangely, there was a dark shadow of despair in the eyes of each.

CHAPTER IV
Lightnin' in Levis!

The outlaw was first to break the silence.

"I don't know why I should be surprised," he murmured bitterly. "I knowed that if anybody picked me up, it would be you. Slayer Brett, eh? The Cheyenne Killer! Well, yo're one worry offa my chest. Yuh got the Meadow ringed with guns, eh?"

"Think I'd be fool enough to bust through the Bunghole alone?" laughed Brett mirthlessly. "Think I'm a pilgrim, Tug?"

"Hardly. How you goin' to get me outa here? How bad do you want me?"

Slayer Brett shook his head. "The bounty on yore hide says dead or alive, Tug. A one pound pull and a one ounce slug will collect it for me. But somehow . . ." his voice held a touch of regret ". . . I don't seem to want it that bad. The Maverick! It don't fit you, Tug. I like to remember you as Tug Mattick, smilin' Texas cowpuncher who saved my life in a Cheyenne saloon; as the rollickin', devil-may-care *tejano* who used to come up the Taril every year, deliverin' longhorns to Standin' Rock for me to passel out to the gut-eaters." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You've sunk a heap, Tug."

"You allus was a preacher," said the outlaw. "Tryin' to convert me?"

"Mebbyso, Tug, after I tell you just what kind of a snake you are an' just how bad you stink in the nostrils of decent men."

The Maverick hung his head. "You ain't tellin' me nothin'," he snarled sullenly. "What's done is past. Anything I am now, they've made me. It's the price I pay fer a hideaway after killin' that sneaky tinhorn in Grassrange. He had it comin', an' I give you my word that—"

"Yore word," sneered Brett. "What's yore word worth, Tug? I know what started you listenin' to the owlhoot. An' I don't know as I blame yuh. It's stayin' with it that's griped me. Never was a time that you couldn't o' gone back to yore ol' drivin' job. Yuh still could, judgin' by the way yore boss talked when I seen him in Cheyenne this summer. But now, after holdin' up the Landusky stage, killin' the driver an' then drygulchin' Deputy Marshal Neb Tinsley, who come after yuh . . ."

"Whoa up!" The outlaw bristled dangerously and his gray eyes snapped. "I didn't have nothin' to do with that stage job, nor with killin' a lawman. I don't doubt that they've hung the tag on me, just as they've held me here an' dared me to try an' leave. Easy to git into Whiskey Barrel through the Bunghole, they've told

me, but hell to git out. You'll be findin' out how true they spoke when you try to take me out."

Brett shrugged. "When a man takes a skunk to his bosom," he murmured, "he likely will stink some. An' folks smellin' you will think shore that yo're the skunk an' let him get away. I've bin around some, Tug. I ain't easy fooled. You ain't the Maverick, even if you are totin' the name. Now, if I knew just who that varmint was . . ."

Tug Mattick cursed. "Don't look at me, feller! I ain't that low . . . yet. I'll take my medicine, an' without squealin'."

"If my bait is right, you won't have to do no squealin'. But in the meantime you'll have some choosin' to do—when Whitey Vorse an' the boys find that I'm in here alone."

"In here alone?" The outlaw's sullenness vanished, replaced by patent admiration. "You're the same gritty devil I sided down there in Cheyenne. But I'm scairt you hubbed some hell this time. They's ten of 'em in the Meadow beside me. All cold killers an' willin' to go the limit fer Lara — the big boss. I'm scairt you'll never git outa this."

"That ain't the point, Tug!" Brett turned his back to the outlaw as he removed the boiling coffee pot to a cooler spot. "It's what happens to you—an' the Maverick. I recall you when you was clean an' straight an' I ain't forgot the time you saved my life. Tug, I'm willin' to violate my oath of office to square the debt. Yo're a good cowboy—as good as they come. But you ain't smart enough to be the Maverick. I'm hopin' yo're smart enough to walk out of this room now, fork a pony an' ride down to yore old outfit in Texas. Yeah, marry the boss's daughter as he wants you to an' stay put.

"If the play comes right, I'll kill the Maverick before many hours has passed. What happens to me don't matter. If I come through, with the Maverick notched into my gun butt, I'll keep on wearin' the star. If not . . ." He shrugged.

The outlaw choked and nodded at one of the greatest manhunters the Northwest ever knew—Leighton N. Rodd, known as Lightnin' Rod and by a dozen other names, some superlatives, others unprintable. The Deputy U. S. Marshal was offering Tug Mattick freedom—and manhood.

"You're white, Lightnin'," he murmured. "Like always. I've thought a lot about quittin' this an' goin' back to Texas. But with these hellers watchin' me like a hawk an' a price on my head . . . it ain't so easy."

"That ain't no excuse now," said the lawman sternly. "Fork yore pony an' ride straight to Rocky Point Crossin'. Hang around there till a man comes ridin' in askin' fer yuh. Ride with him, askin' no questions. He'll know trails that lawmen never track. An' he'll he ridin' south to the Mexican Border. On the trail out of here, watch out for Laramie. Yeah, an' a ranicky bunch ridin' with him. What's holdin' yuh?"

He held out his hand. Tug Mattick gripped it fervently. Eagerly he turned to the door. Before he reached it he paused, listened. Through the windows broke the pallid light of dawn. Through that dawn was echoing the hoofbeats of a single horse!

They heard the sudden hoarse challenge of the outlaws. Then the pony's hoofbeats were silenced as the beast plunged to a stop, and the air was filled with a shrill caterwauling, mingled with the angered cursing of aroused men.

"Whatever from hell?" Tug queried, and threw open the door.

Not a dozen strides away the outlaws were clustered about a slender boy, a kicking, biting, battling bundle of rawhide and barbwire that they had dragged from his horse. It was Goober Thoms! Tug Mat-

tick loosed a bellowed order to the men.

"Hey! That's the Thoms kid! Turn him loose!" They unhanded him and moved back.

"Goober, how in hell did you get past the trail guard?" Mattick demanded.

The boy arranged his disordered clothing, straightened the hogleg in his waist-

band. His eyes were blazing. "I didn't see no guard," he barked, then his eyes widened as he recognized the man he knew as Slayer Brett.

"Hi, pardner," he murmured, stiffly, and his eyes shuttled from the lawman to Tug Mattick and back again. "I shore never figgered to see you standin' right behind the Maverick, with yore gun leathered. Howcome?"

"Nor I didn't expect to see you here in Whiskey Barrel Meadow, Kid," answered the lawman evasively. "It's like seein' somebody raised from the dead. How bad was you hurt, button?"

"Don't beat around the bush!" said the tight-lipped youngster. "That man . . ." his left index finger pointed at Tug Mattick and his right hand wrapped itself around the butt of his big gun " . . . is the Maverick! He killed my dad! You come up here to kill him an' lost yore nerve. Well, I'm not losin' mine!"

The outlaws whirled toward Lightnin' Rod. The Kid's gun was sweeping out and the lawman chanced destruction in stopping his powder burning.

"Goober! Wait! This ain't the Maverick! This ain't the man that killed yore dad!"

"Yo're what they said you was!" yelped the aroused youngster, tilting up his weapon. "One of the Wild Bunch—without the nerve to do what you come to do!"

"Wild Bunch!" It was Whitey Vorse's hysterical cry that sent the outlaws into action, that made the dawn hideous with the crash and roar of guns. "Payoff fer that Landusky stage job! Gun 'im down!"

His gun flashed out and sideswiped the boy to the ground. Lightnin' Rod dropped Whitey an instant too late, with a bullet through the head. The outlaws scattered, drawing and firing as they ran. Tug Mattick had only a clock-tick to make his choice. And he made it. His pistol swept out to cut down one of the renegades who would have slain the marshal.

"Thanks, Tug," Lightnin' Rod shouted as he sprinted to the falling boy, shooting as he ran. Holstering a gun, he caught up the slender writhing form, ran with him for the cover of the cabin. Tug Mattick covered them. A bullet numbed Lightnin's left arm, driving him to his knees and causing him to lose the hold on his flesh and blood burden. Then he staggered up, caught Goober by his ragged coat collar and dragged him inside the cabin.

Tug Mattick followed and slammed the door shut. Lightnin' laid the boy on a bunk, sat down to wad a bandanna against the hole at the point of his shoulder.

"Hit bad, Lightnin'?" asked Tug, gluing a wary eye to a window.

"Just a scratch," the lawman answered. "You?"

"Not even that much. But the ruckus ain't over yet."

Outside the echoes had died and the silence was all the more empty because of the turmoil it succeeded. Into that silence intruded now the beat of hoofs. A rider came racing up to the cabins.

"Cripes!" they heard him cry. "Whitey dead! An' Bronc an' Slim! I knowed there'd be trouble when I found Teton's hawss runnin' wild an' then found his body

cached in the brush. He'd bin shot to rags!"

A sharp order from one of the cabins drew him quickly off his horse and scampering to cover. Tug Mattick and Lightnin' Rod, listening for further activities from the renegades, failed to hear a rustle of movement from the bunk. Goober Thoms' low snarl made them whirl. The boy sat on the edge of the bunk, his gun cocked and held unwaveringly upon the one he knew as the Maverick.

"Pull yore piece around, Maverick-man!" he yelled. "An' make it fast. When you level it on me, I'm lettin' yuh have it, yuh murderin' skunk! Make yore fight, feller, so I kin send yore rotten soul to hell!"

The lawman stepped squarely into the line of fire, his face gray with pain but his eyes shining with admiration for the plucky little range waif.

"Put it away, Goober!" he ordered. "This ain't the man that killed yore dad."

"Mebbyso not!" raged the youngster. "But the snake-trackin' son was their leader! He's responsible. Step outa the way while I serve him his needin's!"

"He ain't even their leader, Kid. He's Tug Mattick, an old friend o' mine an' a right jasper. Put up that iron. The Maverick ain't here. Mebbyso he'll show later. Mebbyso not."

"Not the Maverick?" Goober's face fell. "Gosh! I reckon yo're right though, Slayer. He throwed in his gun ag'in' 'em, didn't he? Sided us outa that tight? All this fer nothin'! I've bin cheated."

"So have I, button. But don't lose heart. I've baited a trap an' the Maverick may come to the bait . . ."

A crash of glass cut him off. Smashing through one of the dusty panes came an oil can with the top cut out. The tin tilted as it lit, the white liquid sloshing over the puncheon floor. And as the three in the cabin stared at it, a bundle of flaming rags hurtled through the aperture. The oil burst into flame with a roar.

Driven back by the raging inferno, the three flung themselves to the floor, behind an upended table. Choked with smoke, smothered by acrid fumes, they bellied down in a desperate attempt to tough it out until the most of the oil was consumed, until there was some hope of reaching the door without being cooked.

"Reminds me o' when I was a kid in Texas," grunted Tug Mattick, "and the Comanches burnt us out."

"Reminds me of hell!" answered Lightnin' Rod, between coughs that set his wound to bleeding.

"Smoke's dampin' the fire!" yelped the boy, peering through the sooty murk. "Le's hightail. Palm yore irons, gents, an' le's show them polecats what hell's really like!"

Above the roar and crackle of flame came the triumphant jeers of the outlaws outside. They were waiting, watching the door. But lead was ever sweeter to man than death by fire. Tug led the way. Goober clumped crazily in his ill-fitting boots as he followed. Lightnin' Rod fetched up the rear.

Tug flung open the door. A great gust of black smoke puffed outward. And through it leaped the three enemies of the Whiskey Barrel Meadow Gang, their guns spitting back at the outlaws' fire.

Tug howled and went down. Lightnin' jerked him up with one hand as he emptied his .45 with the other. Goober, weapon empty, threw his arm about the wounded man. Together they ran the terrible gantlet, heading toward a sagging-roofed outbuilding a few rods away.

A slug burned along the lawman's scalp, driving him down and bringing his companions down over him. Lead droned over them as they fell. Before another volley came they had risen and staggered into the crumbling shack. Huddling there, bleeding from wounds and hopelessly trapped, they gave back at the renegades. Using

one of Lightnin' Rod's guns, the boy shrilled the deathless challenge that white men had used to win the West.

"Yuh gotta kill us to stop us, yuh polecats! So have at it—kill or be killed!"

And as the torched cabin sent leaping pillars of flame into the faintly tinting sky, the outlaws gave answer with smoke and lead and shrill yelps of victory. It looked like the end.

CHAPTER V
Brand for the Maverick

Through the rotting logs of the crumbling shack the renegades poured a murderous fire. And from the unchinked vents the desperate trio threw scattered shots as they fought for time . . . and life. The light had grown full and the tops of the highest peaks were touched with sunrise. Tug Mattick paused in his reloading, his face twisted.

"How many shells yuh got, Lightnin'?" he queried hoarsely.

"Six fer the Kid an' as many more fer me," grunted the lawman. "An' you?"

"Four. Looks like the end, old friend. I'm sorry it was me that got you into this."

"You didn't, Tug. An' if you did, I'd owe yuh that much. Keep yore upper lip stiff, feller."

From one corner of the shack Goober's weapon spoke and the youngster raised a thin rebel yell.

"Plugged him!" he chortled. "Right through the guts! Hell, men, they ain't rubbin' out Goober Thoms. If the shells play out, I still got my Barlow. An' I'm a cuttin', slashin' fool with a shiv!"

The two men were able to smile in spite of pain and hopelessness.

"He assays pure guts," murmured Mattick. "Ninety proof an' smooth as greased britches."

"Makes a man ashamed of his fears," confessed the lawman.

The firing outside had sputtered to a stop. From the Bunghole, the boxed entrance to Whiskey Barrel Meadow, came a long yell—a signal that was answered by the hidden outlaws. A cavalcade poured out of the slot, riding swiftly toward the cabins.

"It's Laramie!" Goober spat. "Fetchin' in them cowboys to rub you out, Slayer."

"Hold it, Kid!" Lightnin' Rod cried. "Don't waste no lead."

"That ain't wastin' lead, pardner," protested the youngster. "Laramie won't do us no good. He's *bad!* An' he's leadin' them Texicans here to hang you high. I heard him rib it up."

"Wait!" commanded the lawman, severely. "Lissen!"

The riders, a dozen strong, had drawn up close to the burning cabin. Laramie La Forge shifted his eyes from the flames to the four dead men on the ground.

"Slayer Brett, eh?" he snarled. "Torched a cabin an' tallied four notches as you boys come pilin' out. That reads like the yella-striped son. You got him forted in yonder shack?"

"Yeah, chief," answered one of the outlaws. "Holed up an' some lead burnt."

"Mattick's with him!" croaked another. "An' that ranicky little Thoms kid."

"Who . . . Goober? He can't be there. We dropped him in the Cowskin. He was bad shot."

"Then he's shore twins," was the grim answer. " 'Cause he's in there."

"Well," rapped Laramie, "what you gabbin' about? Smoke 'im out! An' that yella traitor, Mattick. An' that feller callin' himself Slayer Brett, who's really Big Ben Kilpatrick—one of them Hole-in-the-Wall killers. He's busted in here askin' fer it, an' never leave it be said that the Maverick ain't accommodatin'.

"That ruin's blind on three sides. You boys take the back an' we'll take the two

ends. Get 'em into the open an' drop 'em. C'mon, you Texicans!"

He started his pony and his Meadow outlaws fanned out to execute his order. But the grim-faced Texas cowpunchers were stiffly unresponsive. Laramie screwed in the saddle to stare at them.

"Hey!" he demanded. "What ails you gunnies?"

"Just doin' some thinkin', that's all," answered the tall ramrod. "You mean to say yo're settin' forth tuh kill a kid?"

"Why not? Ain't yore lost thirty thousand dollars worth one kid?"

"No part of one kid," snapped the Texan coldly.

"Well, my five thousand is," snarled Laramie. "An' I ain't overlookin' the ten thousand reward on Ben Kilpatrick, as long as we're figgerin'. If you boys want a split of that . . ."

"The split of that bounty," the other grinned, "is exactly nothin'. Because that don't happen to be Ben Kilpatrick!"

"What . . . what's that?" Laramie stared. "Come again. You say he ain't Kilpatrick? How do you know?"

"Because," the leader of the trail crew straightened in the stirrups. "I happen to be Ben Kilpatrick myself."

"Gawd!" yelled one of the outlaws, terror in his voice. "An' that's the Wild Bunch behind him. There's the Sundance Kid! An' yonder's Butch Cassidy!"

As one man the bunched Longriders drew their guns to cover the outlaw crew. Laramie stared, his face tense and drawn. All the starch seemed suddenly to have gone out of him.

"I get it," he mumbled. "I'm tricked. What you want?"

"Laramie!" The pug-nosed Longrider who had ministered to Goober in the Cowskin, and whom one of the renegades had pointed out as Butch Cassidy, edged his pony forward. "You know what happens to them that leave our sign on their own skullduggery, don't yuh?"

Laramie was gray as death. His left hand crept up to caress his neck.

"W-what do you mean?" he gasped.

"Laramie," said Cassidy, without rancor, "you robbed the Landusky mail stage an' killed the driver. Then you planted the Wild Bunch sign on the job. A lot of folks read that sign the way you wanted it read. Some didn't. Well . . . we have a way of bootheelin' our own snakes."

Laramie shuddered. "I didn't do that job, Butch. Honest I didn't," he protested weakly.

"Who did?"

"It was the Maverick! Him that's forted up in the shack yonder. Yeah—" his enthusiasm increased as he told it, "him, an' the Cheyenne Killer, Slayer Brett, done the actual killin'. The Slayer got drunk in my Cowskin an' made his brags. Ain't that right, boys?"

The Whiskey Barrel Meadow bunch answered him in a chorus of weak affirmatives. The Longriders only smiled and turned their eyes toward the shack, from which came a bloody trio.

At the sound of footsteps behind him, Laramie La Forge turned in the saddle. His shifty, sullen eyes locked with those of the man who had called himself Slayer Brett. Tug Mattick limped at his right. Chill-faced Goober Thoms shuffled along at his left, his pale eyes fixed unwinkingly on Laramie. The boss renegade of Cowskin Crossing grinned crookedly.

"Slayer Brett," he sneered. "Fiercest grizzly in all the mountains! The pizen-fanged gunnie that made Wild Bill eat crow meat! The jigger that robbed the Landusky mail stage an' killed the driver! Well, feller, yore sins has caught up with yuh. You know who these fellers are?" His hand swept over the smiling Longriders.

"Who?" asked the lawman, in all seriousness.

"They're the Wild Bunch, that's who! Come here to drape a loop around yore neck an' stretch it out this long—" he measured off two feet with his hands—"for plantin' their sign on that stage job. They tromp their own snakes, I'll tell a man."

"Wait a minute, Laramie!" commanded

Butch Cassidy. "You're a little off in yore reckonin'. That ain't Slayer Brett."

LARAMIE'S face fell. His harried eyes searched the faces of the Longriders.

"Not—not Slayer Brett?" he snarled. "Then who in the hell is he?"

"I'm Leighton N. Rodd!" said the lawman, softly. "Ever hear of me?"

"Rodd!" The renegade started, and his eyes glittered with renewed hope. "The marshal from Cheyenne! Yeah, I've heard of you. Who hasn't? An' yore posse . . . I suppose their guns is trained on us now, eh?"

His eyes swept eagerly up to the piney slopes, rosy in the sunrise. "Yo're a sly fox, Marshal. An' you've nabbed yoreself a hundred thousand dollars in bounties on this Wild Bunch. I'm awful happy that I could help by lettin' yuh pull that hold-up play in the Cowskin. Purty slick, I'll tell a man. If there's anything I can do to help . . ."

"You shore can," grinned Lightnin' Rod.

"How?" Laramie asked eagerly.

"By putting up your hands!" snapped the lawman. "An' steppin' off yore hawss. I'm arrestin' you!"

"For what?"

"For robbin' the Landusky stage!"

"But I didn't," Laramie squealed. "The Maverick done it!"

"Which is all I wanted to hear you say, La Forge!" snapped Butch Cassidy. "Seein' that you admitted bein' that murderin' varmint when we rode in here. Take him, Marshal."

"But this Wild Bunch?" yelled Laramie. "What about them?"

"The Wild Bunch," the lawman stated, "fetched me down to Cowskin Crossin' an' ribbed up this whole play to prove they didn't do that job an' that you did. So, lift 'em, Laramie."

The hot blood of rage dyed the boss renegade's face. "You double-crossin' law buzzard!" he rapped, and drove his right hand in the draw. Butch Cassidy, like the rest, was surprised by the man's sudden play. Yet he, and he alone, seemed to have a chance to save the lawman, who was far behind Laramie in going for his gun. No one seemed to remember the boy who crouched behind Lightnin' Rod, staring with hate-filled eyes at the man who had murdered his father.

But now the lad uncoiled like a bundle of springs. His gun whipped up, blazing, as Laramie's weapon cleared the holster lip. Only one shot blasted the morning. Laramie stiffened in the stirrups. His gun slid from his fingers. His face, reflecting all the horror of one who looks through the opaque veil into the hereafter, went gray as death touched him. He slumped limply forward and fell over the horn of his saddle.

Butch Cassidy loosed the pressure on his trigger and heaved a sigh.

"Thanks, Kid," he said, "for savin' my record of never havin' killed a man."

"An' thanks again, Goober," added Lightnin', "for savin' me another lead-stoppin'. It's fittin', I reckon, that it was you that stopped him. Fittin' an' proper an' freighted with fate."

But the boy showed no appreciation of their thanks. His pinched face was long

and morose. His slender shoulders slumped dejectedly.

"I had to do it, men," he murmured wearily. "I promised my dad I'd square the deal he got. But it shore does bog down a man's immortal soul to do a killin', don't it? Well," his pale eyes lifted soberly to Butch Cassidy. "You — yo're roddin' the Wild Bunch, are yuh?"

"Fer augerin' purposes, yes," answered the Longrider. "Why, Kid?"

"Well, I've done killed me a man an' the law'll be runnin' me ragged," complained the youngster. "I've heard me the owl hoot an'—an' I'd admire a heap to ride along with yuh. I kin ride an' rope an' shoot an' I ain't scairt o' nothin'. Yeah, an' I kin cook better'n a Chink. How's about takin' me with yuh?"

Cassidy stifled an overpowering impulse to laugh. He shook his head.

"Sorry, Kid. I reckon yo're a little too tough fer our crowd. Besides, the law is standin' right beside yuh."

Lightnin' Rod laid his arm about the boy's shoulders.

"Son," he said, "Butch is right. I'm forced to take yuh. But not to jail, like yo're thinkin'. I'm takin' you to Cheyenne an' puttin' you into school. An', God helpin' me, I'm doin' all I can to make somethin' of the stout heart that beats in that chest o' yores. Butch—" the lawman jerked his head at Tug Mattick. "This is an old friend o' mine. Call him Tug. I'd admire if you boys would let him ride south with you as far as Texas. Mebby you can show him a few of yore tricks as to how to fool a bounty-huntin' sheriff."

"Count on us, Lightnin'."

"An', Butch . . ." Lightnin' Rod reached out the money he'd stolen in the Cowskin. "You better take this before I forget it. An' thanks for playin' out the game."

"Shore," grinned the boss Longrider. From the tied bandanna he took a thick bundle of banknotes that had comprised Laramie La Forge's game bank. "Lightnin'," he said, "I'd like you to take this. A U. S. Marshal don't make a whole lot of money. Hardly enough to afford to iron out the wild strain in a kid like Goober. Hardly enough to do a good job o' makin' him a better man than I am . . . or than you are. Now—what are you doin' with these gunnies of Laramie's?"

"I hadn't give it a thought, Butch. You know that when you girdle the trunk, the leaves are shore to fall."

"Hear that?" Cassidy demanded of the sullen outlaws. "Yo're plumb lucky to have bin struck by lightnin'. But it never strikes twice in the same place. Fork yore hawsses an' travel. Don't let us run across you on any of the owlhoot trails we foller —an' we foller 'em all. *Git!*"

They did. The Longriders shook hands and said farewell. Then they rode. Down at the mouth of the Bunghole, they paused to fling up their hands to the grim and bloody man who stood with his arm about an awed boy.

Tug Mattick saluted with them. Then they were gone into the mystery that surrounds the fate of the Hole-in-the-Wall boys. And the stern eyes of Leighton N. Rodd were a little moist as he drew the kid closer. Not a very good lawman in that moment, maybe, but one you could surely like. One to ride the river with. Lightnin' in Levis.

The Cactus City Department

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

VOL. 18 NO. 54

CRIMINAL IS NABBED IN MIDST OF GUNPLAY

Sheriff Arrests Thief Single-Handed

On account of there has been a lot of saddle tramps and miscellaneous gunmen drifting into town lately, a rumor has got started that there is going to be a feud or other trouble bust loose pretty quick. Some chicken-hearted citizens has even been sleeping with a gun under their pillow because they hasn't got any confidence that Sheriff Banning can take care of the trouble when it does bust loose.

Now, that is plain dang foolishness, because the sheriff is a plenty efficient lawman and he is ready to risk his life, day or night, to protect you citizens from crime and other dangers. For instance, late last Saturday night a hell of a racket, with much shooting and gunfire, woke up practically everybody in town. Right away some yellow-bellied citizen went a-running for the sheriff, who is a hearty sleeper.

Because the y-b citizen, who was all excited and fearful, told him so, the sheriff didn't know but that the expected feud had busted loose. So he put on both guns and tore down to the *cantina* where all the shooting was going on.

But it turned out that it wasn't no feud or other trouble which had busted loose atall. It was nothing but a gunfight. A dozen or so buckaroos from the Flying W had tangled with a bunch from the Diamond Dot, and they was shooting it out, that's all.

Sheriff Banning was pretty disappointed that it wasn't something serious, so's he could maintain law and order. But even though it was a private fight and none of his business, he waited around, in a safe place, until all the Diamond Dot riders had been killed or run out of town. Then just to assure you citizens that the Law was on the job, he went into the *cantina* to check up on things.

It was a mighty good thing he did, too, because he caught a gent right in the middle of a crime. The gent was Roan Rhodes, who figured that in the excitement and gunsmoke he could pull a fast one. He had snitched a pint of liquor from behind the bar and was trying to sneak out the back door with it. But our eagle-eye sheriff caught him red-handed and very promptly arrested the thief single-handed.

I guess that ought to prove to you citizens that you are well protected from crime or other harm as long as we got a able lawman like Sheriff Banning, who is fearless and efficient.

PERSONALS

The rumor is plumb false that Jackpot Gene, the well-known gambler, pulled out of town because somebody was gunning for him. The real reason for his departure was on account of he was losing money at his business. Shucks, it got so that everybody in town was wise to the way Jackpot was marking the cards.

That vicious dog of Slash-ear Simmons' got loose the other day and went tearing down the street looking for somebody to bite. The first citizen the dog met up with was Filthy Phil, and it took a good healthy bite out of Filthy's off leg.

However, says Slash-ear, the dog will recover—even though it made him mighty sick for a while.

STRANGER LIES BOTH COMING—AND GOING!

Hard To Believe Him, Citizens Told

Usually when a man comes to Cactus City and sets hisself up in business, this here newspaper is ready to give him a good word. But the newest businessman here—well, I got a good notion not to pay any attention to him, as he absolutely refused to buy a advertisement in this paper.

Howsoever, it is my duty to warn you citizens about this newcomer. He ain't here to do anybody any good but hisself, and his business is only one step (and a short step at that) above sheep herding or horse thieving. This gent, whose name is Findley, is a auctioneer.

For the benefit of you citizens who ain't ever lived in a metropolis like Cactus City before, I better explain that a auctioneer is sort of a professional liar. He makes his living by telling folks everything but the truth — and making them believe it.

I guess you all have heard about the hombre who was such a liar that when he wanted to call in his hogs to feed them, why he had to get somebody else to do the calling because his hogs wouldn't believe him. Well, this here Findley is just such a gent as that, excepting he owns horses instead of hogs. When his horses hear him say "Giddap" or "Whoa" they think he is lying to them.

Now, that ought to make it pretty hard for this Findley to handle a horse, but it really don't bother him atall. He ain't only just a liar, he is a double liar, so when he wants to start a horse he says "Whoa." And when he wants to stop one, he says "Giddap." That just goes to show.

EDITORIAL

A lot of you citizens has been complaining lately that preaching and lecturing you folks is a sky-pilot's job and not a newspaper's. Well, it is a preacher's job, all right, but a preacher ain't always very successful at it. He don't convince you folks because he will give you some far-away example of what he is talking about. Like he will quote from the Bible about some gent who did wrong a long time ago, and what he got for doing same.

Well, that sort of thing don't make no impression on you folks, because things has got to be made pretty plain before you understand. So that is why I am going to give you a lecture about Honesty Is the Best Policy, and give you a close-to-home example which even you thick-skull rannyhans can savvy and appreciate the moral of.

A while back, Runt Russell uncovered some likely looking ore over on Mesa de Ora. After staking out a claim he high-tailed it to town for a grubstake. But while he was gone, Greasewood Green come along and jumped the claim.

Now, that was very dishonest of him, and Runt said as much when he got back, giving Greasewood a fine lecture on Honesty Is the Best Policy. But Greasewood just laughed at him, seeing as Runt wasn't packing a gun. And Runt, who is a meek little gent, went on up the ridge a ways and staked another claim for hisself.

Well, as it turned out, the claim that Greasewood jumped petered out a few feet under the surface. And the new claim that Runt staked turned out to be a bonanza.

Even you citizens ought to be able to figure out the moral in that, so I won't say no more. But just remember that Honesty Is the Best Policy—except, of course, in a horse trade or a poker game. A man ain't supposed to be honest then.

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you folks what kind of a double-crossing hombre this auctioneer is.

WARNING!

All you citizens who have cats that you think anything of, and don't want to lose same, had better keep your pets inside your houses. The reason I am giving you this warning is because Choctaw Tolliver has done bought a fiddle, and you know how heavy-handed Choctaw is. It won't be long before he breaks a string on that fiddle and will be hunting a new supply of cat gut.

BULL IS SAVED FROM A HORRIBLE DEMISE

Henpeck Herrington was down back of his feed corrals the other day fixing some fence when he heard a hell of a commotion up at the house. At first he didn't pay no attention to it, but pretty quick one of his hands yelled to him, "Hey, Henpeck! Yore prize bull has done busted out'n his corral and got yore wife cornered in the back yard. Shall I shoot him?"

Now, that was very bad news to Henpeck, who thinks a lot of that blue-ribbon bull. And having been married to his wife for twenty years, he was also pretty well acquainted with her. So he was downright anxious and worried as he yells back, "Shoot him hell! You stay right there and protect him!"

HIDEOUT UNEARTHED

When old Beaver Burrel come into the Gem Barbershop and Baths the other day, Cross-cut Kane made a discovery that pleased Mrs. Dinwiddie very much. As Cross-cut started to trim down that long red beard of Beaver's, he flushed out of the whiskers Mrs. Dinwiddie's pet mocking bird, which got out of its cage a while back.

While he was about it, I don't see why Cross-cut didn't dig a little deeper into that chin mattress. Maybe he would have found that setter pup he lost last month.

SOCIETY DOINGS

The Mare's Nest, Cactus City's finest honkytonk, is expecting a couple of new girls this week. They are the Soisette Sisters, who come to Cactus City direct from Paris—by way of New York, St. Louis, Dodge City, Albuquerque, Juarez and a few other miscellaneous Border Towns.

(Well, all right, maybe that ain't just exactly a society item, but nevertheless it will interest most of you gents in a social way.)

Last month Mr. and Mrs. Maverick Moore had the pleasure of a three-week visit from Mrs. Moore's mother. This month they is entertaining Mrs. Moore's Aunt Libby and five children. And for next month they expect a nice long visit from one of Mrs. Moore's sisters (with only three children).

Well, it's your own dang fault, Maverick! You should ought to have picked you out a orphan to get married to.

IN THE BAG

Harmless Hogan is generally supposed to be pretty loco in the head, but every once in a while he gives back an answer that makes folks suspicious of whether he is as crazy as he is supposed to be. Like the other day he was in Short-weight Weston's store buying some grub, and among other things he asks for a bag of milk.

"A bag of milk!" exclaims Short-weight, surprised that even Harmless is that loco. "Hell, don't you know that milk comes in a can, not in a bag?"

For a long time Harmless studies that over before he comes back with, "Well, maybe so. Maybe you're right, but I don't ever recollect seeing any can attached to a cow."

OBSERVATIONS

Pop McCoy allows that this business of womenfolks changing their mind all the time ain't such a bad habit after all. They might, he points out, get a better one in the exchange.

A Streak of Powder

By

ARTHUR H. CARHART

Walt Stark had to get hold of that five hundred dollars. If he didn't, he would lose his most treasured possession—his homestead.

Leaning against the mahogany bar of the Casco Pinto, wet spot in the unregenerate town of Bills Forks, old Walt stood so close to that five hundred dollars that he

Much As Walt Stark Needed The Money, It Went Against The Grain, Collecting Bounty On A Younker Like Jess Calhan. Then Fate, Through Their Common Enemy, Forced A Deal

actually brushed elbows with it. Dead or alive Jess Calhan was worth that sum if returned to Slim Valley.

Walt scrutinized Calhan's reflection in the bar mirror. The kid hadn't lived in Slim Valley very long before murder had been done—and he had run from it. Walt Stark had been away at the time. Therefore, he was able to stand here now, unrecognized by the kid, without Calhan's suspecting that anyone had caught up with him.

The boy was an easy-balanced stripling; stringy, whang-tough, with a ready laugh and reckless eyes. As he looked at him, Old Walt remembered when he, himself, was a young fellow, all full of love of life and danger. And Callahan, confident and unwarned, was nigh a dead man right now.

Across miles of desert, plain and mountain Walt had followed this fugitive's trail. The need for that five hundred dollars had driven him on. He had to have it to finance the court battle against Lacey Gair, who was contesting Walt's homestead patent. Without money to fight in court the land was as good as lost.

But desperately as he wanted that money, Walt revolted at the thought of collecting it on anybody's corpse. And sign had warned Walt plainly that Calhan was heading toward quick death.

Men entering the Casco Pinto checked their guns. What happened outside did not concern Pete Lascar, owner, but war within the bar was muzzled.

"This is my last," young Calhan had said. "You can give me my artillery."

His guns had been placed before him as he finished his drink. He broke them, glanced at the cylinders. His face did not change its expression as he holstered them.

But Walt had seen the telltale sign of doom. He had glimpsed the little streak of powder that had spilled from one of the chambers, and he knew that although shells and powder remained in the chambers, the lead had been pulled!

Walt surmised who had done it — the other man who was trailing Calhan; Lacey Gair. Walt had seen him in Bills Fork an hour before, had avoided him, for there was no love lost between them. Each knew the other was there to get Calhan and collect the head money. It would be Gair who had had Pete Lascar's rascals pull the bullets from those guns. Gair wasn't taking any chances. He planned to collect his money on a corpse.

The kid was too young to die that way. He might have killed Harry Varner back in Slim Valley, or he might not. That was for the law to decide. But this foul business Gair had cooked up wouldn't give Calhan a chance to appear before the law.

"Mud in yore eye," drawled Jess Calhan. He downed the last drop in his glass, then holstered his futile guns.

"Pleasant dreams," replied the barkeep sardonically.

"Give me my irons, quick!" Walt Stark ordered.

He glanced at Calhan, who stopped inside the door to light a cigarette. In a few seconds that had passed since he had seen the spilled powder, Walt hadn't seen a way to proceed. Bluntly announcing his discovery might start the trouble instantly. Gair might have aides in the saloon. Trying to talk to the fugitive would be as risky. What Walt Stark wanted to do was corner the boy, talk it out with him, and persuade him to go back to the valley alive, not dead.

Now he had to act fast or that chance would be gone; the kid would be dead.

As Walt grabbed his guns, Jess Calhan was stepping through the door. Stark reached the door just as Calhan was ready to step into the street.

"Calhan, I've got you cold!" the voice of Lacey Gair came out of the dark.

"Don't draw, kid," Walt cracked out sharply.

But hair-trigger and swift, Calhan's guns were sweeping clear.

Powder blazed, but Calhan's gun was cracking harmlessly and futilely. In that instant old Walt was not thinking of reward money; he was thinking of a kid cut down without a fighting chance, and he threw all his old gristle forward to knock Calhan rolling.

A bullet brushed by. Fury seized Walt. Old grudges against Gair and new anger over the scurvy trick steamed within him.

Calhan staggered. Walt knocked him on into the shadow. Then he turned—and was hit a sledge blow that knocked him low. Briefly he wondered if Gair knew he was there and was trying to cut him down beside Calhan. He shot as he slumped, and Gair yelled in surprise.

Stark tried to rise, but blackness blotted out the lights. He was vaguely conscious of Jess Calhan shouting they must get clear.

Numbed, bewildered, Walt Stark knew he was being half-carried, half-dragged toward the hitch rack. In the Casco Pinto boot heels drummed. Over against a dark wall Lacey Gair bawled fit to kill. Nightmare caught Walt Stark, and groggy pain racked him.

"Pardner, where's yore horse?" rasped Calhan.

"Second on the north, but—" Walt began.

He tried to protest again as he was lifted to the saddle. Then he grabbed whatever was under his hand and held on. They rode, Walt too ill to know all that happened, but certain that Gair hadn't slaughtered the kid and wouldn't be taking a corpse back to Slim Valley.

Dimly Stark knew when he was lifted out of the saddle, carried and laid on a bed. Then everything faded again.

He awakened to find himself staring hazily into the dark, scarred face of Tuck Leonard—an outlaw of the lowest caliber.

Leonard leered at him, showing broken, dirty teeth. "I said if I ever got a chance I'd scramble you!" he snarled.

Stark closed his eyes, waiting for the blow. But no blow fell, for Jess Calhan came striding in. Walt saw Calhan hit Tuck Leonard. Then he lost a grip on consciousness again.

The crashing smash of a breaking chair, a man yelling, pulled Walt out of his stupor. In the first hazy moment, he believed it was a bad dream. He raised on his elbow.

Lunging, whirling, plunging, fists swinging, Calhan and Leonard were tearing at each other. As he watched, Leonard knocked Calhan staggering.

Head low, Calhan flung himself back, his arms pumping. By the weary way they threw themselves at each other, Walt knew the fight had been going on for some time.

"Hey!" shouted Leonard. "Hey, you—"

The words were knocked back in his throat. Calhan followed in, his fists smacking. Tuck sagged, clutched, buckled, and was beaten down and knocked into a corner.

For a moment, Jess Calhan stood panting.

"Get out," he said finally, his voice cold as steel. "Travel!"

Leonard sagged to an elbow, his bloody face dark with fury. "Damn you, this is my cabin. You can't—" he began.

"Get goin'," said Calhan, "before I break yore neck."

He yanked Tuck Leonard to his feet and shoved him through the door.

"Now start travelin'! And don't come back!"

Walt glanced around the log-walled room. A lumber table was overturned, the chair broken, a woodbox beside an ancient, cast-iron range had been knocked over in the fight. He heard the sound of a horse being ridden away from the house. Then Calhan came inside, smiling faintly with red-stained lips as he looked at his barked knuckles. He ambled over to Walt.

"That wake you up, old-timer?" he asked laconically.

"Wouldn't have missed that finish for anything," drawled Walt, feeling a sudden queer warmth for the kid. "What was it about?"

"Difference of opinion," Calhan replied. "That yap claimed he had cause to put a bullet in you. I didn't agree with him."

Walt stared at him for a second. "How come you didn't like the idee?" he asked finally.

Calhan grinned. "Wal, you see," he said. "You piled in night before last when I was being slaughtered, an' that sort of counts with me."

Walt knew he referred to the warning he had given about the bullets.

"You say that happened two nights ago?" he asked.

"You've been sick," explained Calhan. "Thought a couple of times I wasn't goin' to pull you through."

So Calhan must have been nursing him for two nights and days!

"And you sort of charged into bringin' me up to this hideaway without knowin' who—" Walt began.

"You stood beside me when I was in a tight spot, an' that's enough for me," cut in Calhan. "I figure to take my men as they come, an' not ask questions. A fellow can't do what you did t'other night, after that black-hearted Gair jobbed me by pullin' my bullets, an' not be rated my friend."

Calhan stopped. That was a long speech for him. He glanced at the wounded man again, and asked, "How did you know about my guns bein' helpless when you jumped in the other night?"

Walt told him about the spilled powder, and how he had seen no safe chance to give warning, and only a long chance to act.

"I figured it was somethin' like that," mused Calhan.

"When you found the bullets pulled, who'd you figure done it?" Stark asked.

"Lacey Gair," Calhan snapped. "A fellow named Harry Varner was killed in Slim Valley. They claim I killed him. Gair trailed me to take me back—dead. I don't aim to go because I didn't kill Varner."

"You didn't?" Walt raised on his elbow.

Calhan shook his head.

"When Varner went for his gun in that quarrel, I plugged him once, in the shoulder," he said. "Men don't die from bein' spotted in the shoulder."

Walt tried to balance that against the fact that there had been two bullets in Varner—one in the heart and another in the shoulder.

"Then why didn't you surrender an' let the law clear you?" he asked.

"I did go to Gair to give myself up," Calhan answered. "You see, I didn't have many friends in Slim Valley, bein' a newcomer. I thought Gair was my friend. I went alone to his office. He told me Varner was dead. I got stampeded, an' when Gair give me a chance to run—"

"He told you to run?"

"Yep. Because, he said, he was my friend. He said nobody would know I'd been there to surrender, and he didn't want to take me. Even told me of this cabin an' about Tuck Leonard hidin' here."

"Kid," said Walt, "I've got somethin' serious to tell you about me."

"No, you ain't," Calhan stopped him. "You can have robbed banks or orphans, for all I care. Leonard's reason for beefin' you didn't spark with me. I figure he's an automatic liar, anyway. Nothin' counts with me except the way you went to bat the other night. Let's let it ride at that."

In hours that followed, Walt Stark wished again and again that it didn't ride that way. He thought of his homestead and his need of the reward money to save the place. But Calhan was posi-

tive he had shot Varner once, in the shoulder. And Varner had died of a bullet in his heart.

Walt Stark knew he had only to sit tight until he was able to ride, take the kid back, collect the five hundred, and let the law take its course. But every time he followed this line of thought, his plan to take the kid back went to smash on some feeling deep within him.

And, too, there was Lacey Gair. When Gair recovered from the wounds he had received in the row at the Casco Pinto he would come back. Like as not Tuck Leonard would let Gair know that Walt Stark was there too. Maybe Gair would try to make a double play; get revenge on old Walt Stark for blocking that play at the saloon, and to kill Jess Calhan for his head money. It was the kid's creed that a friend was a friend, regardless, that was the stumbling block to a clear trail of action. Stark couldn't make up his mind what to do.

While they were sitting one evening and smoking, Walt spoke.

"Kid," he said slowly, "they'll be after you one of these days. You better drift."

"With a chance of Tuck Leonard comin' back with his grudge, an' you not able to take care of yoreself? Nope. When I find a real friend I stick with him 'til the last card's played. An' this game's not finished until I know yo're clear."

They smoked in silence awhile. Walt thought of the son he had always wanted; a youngster like this who stuck with a friend come hell or rain.

"Better high-tail it," Walt said again.

"Later," Calhan answered.

Walt was a law man. But it wasn't for him to say whether or not the kid had killed Varner. He tried to convince himself that he ought to take Calhan back, collect the money and let the law decide.

The chance of losing that homestead dragged his spirits low, too. Grimly he waged his battle, fought with himself—his love for his home against his desire to be fair to the kid.

It was too blamed deep and complicated somehow, for Walt Stark. But one of these days soon Gair would be back, and he would have to make a decision. If he didn't take Jess in, Gair probably would.

Even that couldn't help Walt in making

up his mind. Maybe the kid would help make the decision.

So, craftily, Walt put the question indirectly to Jess Calhan.

They were sitting outside the cabin, smoking, talking about things in general, as night came into the aspen thickets up canyon from the rough little hut. Walt led the talk to ranching. He outlined the situation regarding his own place, but told it as happening to a friend of his over in another state.

"What'd you do, now, if you was up against somethin' like that?" he asked finally.

"There's a part of a declaration of independence that says, 'Get the money'," Calhan stated indifferently.

Old Walt was deeply disappointed, but he couldn't go thrashing back over that like a cow in a bog, or he'd likely rile up the waters. The boy had taken it just offhand. You can, when some fellow away over a state line is the one losing his land. But this was too close to home for Walt Stark to take that way. So there was still no decision. Walt kept telling himself that he ought to send the kid away. But he put it off. And every day Jess Calhan seemed more and more like a

son to him. A good many times Walt found himself wishing the two of them could ride out of this just as partners, when the time to ride came. But that wasn't on the cards either.

Then the decision was taken from him. Fate, through Lacey Gair, forced the deal.

Jess Calhan had gone to shy the horses back to the cabin. They were allowed to graze, hobbled, in a little park up canyon during the day, but at evening, they were hustled back to grass nearby.

Walt, now able to do chores around the hut, had heated water and was ready to souse the supper dishes. He had just gathered up a pile of tin plates to run them into the pan when a step sounded in the door. Walt looked up.

In the doorway, grinning evilly, stood Lacey Gair. Behind him, revealed by candlelight from the table, was the gaunt form and visage of Tuck Leonard.

In that moment, Walt Stark knew he had procrastinated too long. His heart sank with the knowledge that the future would be directed by what happened here; decided with violence and bloodshed.

"I told you old Stark was with Calhan," Tuck Leonard said. "There's wolf meat here for both of us, Lacey."

Gair ignored him and stepped forward menacingly.

"Where's that kid?" he demanded.

Walt sank the dishes into the pan and sloshed them around, stalling for time. In that moment he made his decision, the one he suddenly realized he would have reached even if Gair had not come. Jess Calhan must get clear, must not be taken back to face a crooked court charge in Slim Valley!

"Where's Calhan?" snapped Gair again.

"He's done gone," said old Walt. "Hightailed it two days past."

"Yo're a liar," said Gair flatly. "You don't take two cups to drink yore coffee. Where's Calhan—quick!"

"I tell you he's gone. A cow waddie was in here this evenin' an' stopped for a snack."

Walt knew it wasn't convincing. He had lifted his voice, hoping it would carry warning to the kid.

"It was this-a-way, Lacey," he came near as he dared to shouting. "This tramp rider come slopin' in about the rump end of the afternoon—"

"Dry up!" Gair snarled. "Wrench down yore voice!"

There was silence. A horse bell tinkled down in the canyon.

"Horses down there," said Gair.

"My horse. I've got him belled."

"Yo're a pore liar, Stark," Gair said, and he smiled with cruel lips. "I'm here to get you both—you an' that kid. And we'll find Calhan."

"He high-tailed it," Walt repeated doggedly. All he could hope now was the kid would hear voices, be warned, and hit out.

"Well," Gair drawled, "this puts *you* in a sweet hole, now, doesn't it? Aidin' a criminal! Tuck, you'll witness this. Our town marshal aidin' the escape of a man the law wants. This is better'n I had hoped, Stark."

Gair chuckled. Walt felt the chill of that threat.

"You'll be a show, bein' brought into Slim Valley handcuffed—if you ever get that far." Gair laughed again. He turned to Tuck Leonard. "If the old fool makes any suspicious move," Gair ordered, "the job of cuttin' him down is yours."

"That kind of an end for me would suit you fine, wouldn't it, Gair?" Walt gritted.

"Suit me fine," answered Gair, "after the way you upset my plans at Bills Fork and took a shootin' hand in the game. Yes, it would suit me fine! See if it won't come out that way. Do an old friend a favor, Stark—just try to escape!"

Walt was mechanically washing dishes, making a clatter, trying desperately to think of some way out.

Gair suddenly stepped forward, struck Walt a numbing blow on the shoulder.

"Where's Calhan?" he demanded angrily, and drew back his arm again. "If you don't talk quick, I'm goin' to beat hell out of you. Where is he?"

"Right here," cracked out Jess Calhan from where he stood in the door. "An' if you touch him again, I'll beef you, Gair."

The air was chill with the breath of death.

Half-bent against the blow that had been about to fall, Walt Stark saw the death creep start in Lacey Gair's muscles. Saw, and wondered frantically if the kid saw it too.

Only shreds of seconds remained before Gair's guns would be blazing.

Walt Stark saw that, and like a trigger click he jumped. He had no weapon, no way to cut Gair down, and Tuck Leonard, braced and hands hovering for the draw, was between Walt and Gair. But he jumped.

With all his force, Walt pitched the pan of dishes and water. It slammed into Tuck Leonard. Walt tripped and stumbled, head down, straight into the midst of bursting battle.

Tuck Leonard let out a whoop of surprise. Gair's voice lifted in strident cursing.

The slapping smash of guns filled the cabin. Walt saw Gair jerk, then stagger. But the guns in Gair's hands were tearing the air.

Just inside the door, weaving and crouching, Jess Calhan came, head down, charging, though he must have realized before he stepped in that he had a choice of ways to follow. One that would take him out of this safely. But the one he had chosen was a gamble with death.

Tuck Leonard cursed as he got his balance. He had lost his gun. He threw himself at Jess Calhan. Gair was dropping, slowly, a questioning look on his ashen features. The kid had got him.

Old Walt wondered why, in this moment, when wings of death beat through the room, he should be noticing the candle flame wavering.

Leonard got to Jess Calhan, bony arms flailing. Then Walt leaped, got hold of his own gun. As he did so, he saw Leonard smash away as Calhan clubbed an empty gun. They danced and writhed, pivoted and smashed into the wall.

On the floor, Gair was hitching up on his elbow, his gun wavering in his hand.

"Throw him clear!" he shrieked at Leonard.

With a mighty heave, Leonard tossed Calhan free.

Walt leaped and kicked at the gun in Gair's hand. It exploded, but the bullet went wild. Calhan sprang back, grappled Leonard savagely, and the fight between the two was on again.

Walt raised his gun, watched for a chance to blast Leonard down. They were spinning and turning too fast. There was too much danger of cutting down the kid.

Again Gair struggled to his knees, groped for his gun. He got it, and turned toward Walt Stark.

"Look out!" It was Calhan who shouted.

He flung Leonard away and jumped toward Gair, aiming a kick at the gun pointed at old Walt. Leonard hit him from behind and the kick missed.

Walt was teetering off balance, but he cut loose the gun he had in his own hand. Barely in time, it caught Gair and knocked him jerking.

Leonard had Calhan against the door frame and was beating the kid's head against it mercilessly, howling and cursing as he did so.

"Don't turn yore back!" gasped the kid to Walt.

Gair was trying to get up, his gun in his left hand. Walt hesitated only a breath. A few more blows and Tuck Leonard would beat the kid into a daze. Gair's eyes were

blazing with a killing fever, and they were fastened on Walt Stark.

"Don't turn—" began the kid in a throaty gasp.

But the smashing beat of Calhan's head as Leonard pounded it against the door jamb shattered the words. With all his strength Walt Stark threw himself forward, gun clubbed, to down Leonard. He felt the searing whistle of lead from Gair's gun. Then he reached Tuck.

A moment the three tangled, swayed and then broke. Then Walt struck Leonard, full, with the pistol butt. Tuck fell with a groan, and Walt whirled to face Lacey Gair.

But Gair was twisting slowly on the floor, his muscles already leaden with death.

Tuck Leonard sat, moaning, his hands gripping his head. Panting, Calhan stood leaning against the door frame. Old Walt sat down suddenly, his legs trembling, conscious of the hop, skip, and jump of his heart. Red war had ripped through the room, sudden battle torn madly through the strained seconds. But it was all over. Only the voice of Lacey Gair, maundering and squalling with his fear of death, remained to break the silence. That and the heavy breathing of winded men.

Then suddenly Gair began to talk. Leonard stopped moaning to listen. Calhan gripped the door frame to keep from falling, his eyes on the dying man. Walt bent forward, his face tense as he listened to the hysterical mouthings.

For Lacey Gair, believing he was heading toward his grave, was crying out the truth. His voice blanketed in hysterical squalling, he was telling how he had rigged the quarrel between Harry Varner and Jess Calhan, because Varner knew something that would put Gair in prison! Telling how he had hoped Jess Calhan would kill Varner, and when he hadn't, how Lacey Gair had finished him with a second shot. Telling how he had tried to kill Calhan at the Casco Pinto—for reward money and to fix the blame of that second shot on the kid for all time.

"Shut up!" Tuck Leonard snarled at him. "Yo're gone crazy."

"It's true," blathered Gair. "I'm dyin'! I can't die with that on my soul!"

"Hell won't see you tonight," sneered Tuck Leonard. "But if you live, prison will. Varner was a friend of mine. I'll finish—"

Walt Stark jumped, caught him. Jess Calhan crashed in, too.

"Tie 'em both up," said the kid, "before they spill more blood."

For several moments they had their hands full. Then they had Gair in bed, bound, but with his wounds ably bandaged. Tuck Leonard lay in the corner. Walt faced Calhan across the table.

"Kid," he said earnestly, "I've got to tell you now why I'm here."

"You don't have to," Calhan answered soberly. "Tuck Leonard spilled the whole business that day I threw him out."

"You knew, an' you—" began Walt.

"When I stack my chips on a man, I go the limit," the kid said.

He looked toward the corner where Gair and Leonard were cached.

"About that homestead," continued Calhan. "I knew you was talkin' about yore own land that night. I'm goin' back with you, pard, an' see that you get the reward. We can set up a pretty slick outfit on that money."

"We?" Old Walt groped.

"Sure," grinned Calhan. "Can I ride with you—pard?"

"Son," said old Walt unsteadily. "Son, if you rode with me, we'd tackle ridin' through hell. Son . . ."

Old Walt choked, and stuck out his hand. No more talk was needed.

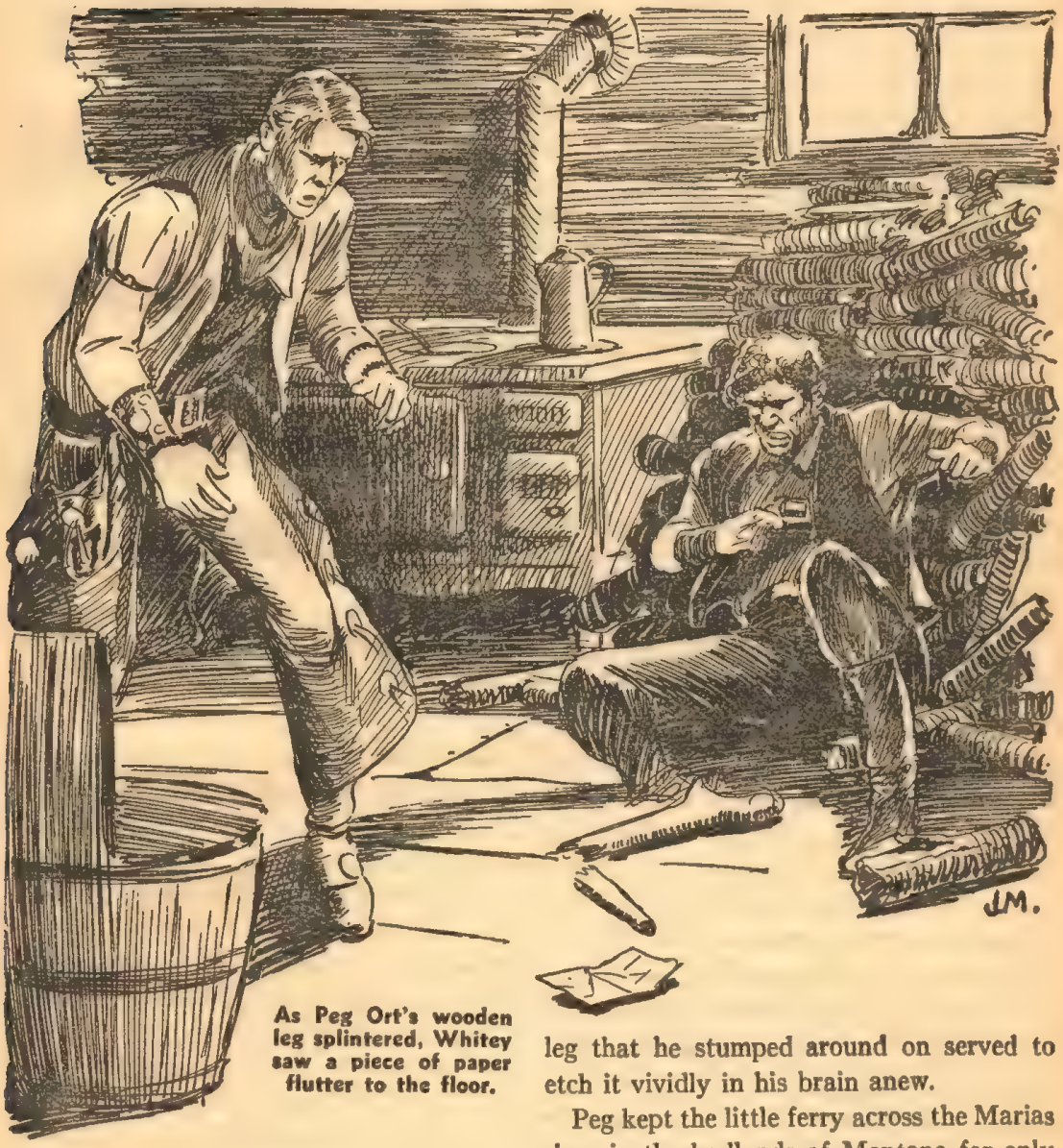
Now Walt Stark knew why he had waited. For fate and a higher hand had been dealing.

TIMBER FOOT

By

CARSON MOWRE

With A Laugh On His Lips And Both Guns Drawn, The Big Stranger Stepped Into That Owl-Hoot Hideout. But It Was A Trap He Was Entering—A Trap That Pegleg Ort Had Waited Ten Years To Spring . . .



As Peg Ort's wooden leg splintered, Whitey saw a piece of paper flutter to the floor.

Peg Ort was on the kill.

For ten years he had carried in his mind the picture of a big, blond, blue-eyed man known as Whitey Southern. Whenever the picture grew dim, the wooden leg that he stumped around on served to etch it vividly in his brain anew.

Peg kept the little ferry across the Marias river in the badlands of Montana for only one purpose. He ran it because it was on that dim trail down which the shadowy figures of the owl-hoot gentry came and went. Sooner or later Whitey Southern would be crossing there. And when that

happened Peg meant to be on hand with his twin partners—two double action .38's, one resting under each shoulder.

Peg Ort knew every twist and turn of that trail from Sweetgrass on the Canadian border to El Paso on the south. He should have, for he had traveled it a good many times—sometimes with a law dog on his trail, other times with Butch Cassiday and his gang on the way to the hole-in-the-wall country in Wyoming.

Peg ran not only the ferry but a hide-out hotel for outlaws. He had certain rules as to how his ferry should be crossed and how long a man could stay in his hotel. He made it easy for the owl-hooters, but he kept his skirts clean with the law. Many a star-toter had stopped in unexpectedly, but he had always gone away alone.

Along the cable that held his flat bottom ferry on its course, Peg had strung a telephone wire. At each end of that wire was a concealed box telephone. Only outlaws knew where those crank boxes were. Before one of them crossed he had to telephone Peg at his cabin. If the coast was clear Ort went over after them.

Ranchers and settlers simply rang a big cow bell hanging to a tree. Peg didn't want to get his signals mixed.

Peg never let any of the boys stay at his place more than two days. He figured that was long enough to rest a horse and a man and wet down their whistles. There were no drunken outlaws carousing around his place. He wanted nothing to interfere with the time when Whitey Southern would come across that river.

Peg was sitting in the little back room of his cabin when the faint tinkle of a bell came to his ears. He got up and let a big mongrel dog out the back door. That dog was another of his ideas. It was trained to range around the house and ferry landing. If the scent of a strange man was on the air, Peg soon knew it and did not answer the telephone. Every outlaw who came to his place petted and played with that dog, so the mongrel would know his scent.

Peg listened for nearly ten minutes before he answered. When no sound came from the dog, he lifted down an old Arbuckle coffee tin. From it he took the box telephone and lifted up the receiver. A growling voice came over the wire.

"Well, what the hell you waitin' for? Come over and get me! It's Kid Curry."

"Be right over, Kid."

Peg put the telephone back, stumped to the door and stopped. The Kid was the one outlaw that Peg was afraid of. He wasn't afraid of the speed of his guns—Peg feared no man there. But the Kid was Butch Cassiday's right hand man, the fastest killer in the gang. And having a waspish disposition, he took a lot of handling.

Just three months ago Peg had thrown the Kid out for wanting to stay and liquor up longer than that two day limit. In the ruckus that ensued Peg had slapped the outlaw across the head with a gun barrel and knocked him out. He couldn't have done it if Curry hadn't been drunk. It would have meant a killing for one of them. As it was the other dragged a knife across Peg's arm.

Peg looked at the scar on his arm before he stepped out of the door. He wondered if the Kid would remember what happened that night. The ferry man slid his hands under the cowhide vest and pulled his .38's. He spun the cylinders and dropped them back lightly in the holsters.

Kid Curry stood in a little clump of cottonwoods on the south bank of the Marias, his horse beside him. Curry was at his meanest. He had come across northern Wyoming and southern Montana on the run, a U. S. Marshal dogging his trail, with little to eat and nothing to drink. He was dead tired.

He watched through the gloom for the

little ferry. His ears soon picked up the slap of wind ripples on the prow as it neared shore.

Peg tied the ferry and clumped up the sandy beach. He gave the low whistle of a night bird. Curry appeared out of the trees and led his horse onto the ferry. Neither spoke until the boat had reached mid-stream.

"How's things down below?" Peg queried tentatively.

" 'Fore I say anything to you, Gimpy, I'm remindin' you that I've got a damned good memory. And I'm not drunk tonight. You walk lightly around me from now on."

The other man glared at Peg and waited to see if the cripple would take it up. When nothing was said, the Kid gave Peg a little of the news of the outlaw trail.

"Gang's split up for a while. We stopped a train down in Kansas and came back to the Hole. Marshals started comin' into the country like flies. Butch and some of the others went south. A damned law dog has been on my tail all the way up here. I'm about all in."

Peg whirled at the mention of the law.

"Then I reckon you can't stay but one night, if the law is follerin' you."

"I thought," came the outlaw's glacial voice, "that I made it purty plain to you a minute ago. Any time you think you can tell me what to do, jist jerk whatever it is you're carryin' an' open the ball!"

Blood suffused the ferryman's face. Rage prompted him to draw one of those twin guns. But his better judgment held his hand in check. If he let go of the tiller the boat would turn in mid-stream and break the cable.

"I'm only doin' it to keep the law away from my place so you fellers can cross without gettin' shot to doll rags," he answered calmly.

"Law or no law, Timber-foot, I'm stayin' till I get ready to leave. Any time you think different, try your luck!"

The rest of the trip was finished in silence. Peg grounded the ferry and tied it to a cottonwood stump. The Kid took his horse to a little stable hollowed out of the cut-bank alongside the river. Peg went into the house and slapped some side pork and beans in a skillet. He knew he was going to have trouble with the Kid.

The little killer slipped in the door a few minutes later. His hands hovered over his guns as he came in. Cold, beady eyes bored into Peg. When he saw no signs of hostility, he looked over to the stove. Hunger for the food cooking there dulled his alertness for a moment. A gun appeared in the one-legged man's hand as if it had been there all the time.

"Shuck that gun belt, Kid! Let it drop to the floor easy. I don't want to have trouble with you. That's why I'm taking your cutter."

Venomously the Kid whirled. When he saw the hammer of Peg's gun go back to full cock, he eased his hand slowly to the belt buckle. The gun dropped to the floor from around his hips.

"Peg, that's twice you've buffaloed me. It won't happen again! Next time I see you, I'm killin' you on sight!"

"Any time, fellow, any time, but right now you're goin' down into the 'hotel' and stay there. I'll throw you some chuck in a few minutes, an' half a bottle of whiskey. Eat, take a few drinks and rest up. You're checkin' out in the morning! No law dog is goin' to find me hiding wanted men—and take me in with 'em. I've got to meet a feller sometime and I aim to be here."

Curry burst out in a raucous laugh.

"He'll be here, all right. An' I'd give a little red wagon to watch it. Might save me the trouble of killin' you."

Peg thrust the gun forward. His beady black eyes were mere slits. All the pent-up rage of long years blazed out.

"What do you know about it? Talk, damn you, or you won't ever leave this place!"

"Nothing much," laughed the Kid. "Butch told me your story once. Heard recent of a feller named Whitey Southern that was kinda ridin' the trails again. He's—"

The quiet of the night was split wide open by Peg's dog. His great baying filled the river valley from horizon to horizon. For one tense moment Ort and the Kid stood frozen. Peg was the first to move. He pushed the other over to the corner by the little sheet iron cook stove.

"Get down in there. We're havin' company."

Curry stooped over and grasped one of the sticks in the woodpile beside the stove. The whole pile came up, revealing a little trapdoor that led down into a room hollowed out below the cabin. Bunks lined the walls. There was a table, and canned goods stacked up in a corner. It was Peg's "hotel."

The little outlaw dropped down into the room and the ferryman closed the trapdoor after him. He sat down facing the front door of his cabin and picked up an old mail order catalogue. The howling of the dog told him his visitor was near. Cautiously he felt the guns under his vest to see that they would come free without binding. That laugh of the Kid's was burning in his mind.

The dog's barking broke off abruptly and there were sounds at the door. Peg watched like a cat, eyes glowering out from under his bushy eyebrows. But there was no knock and the door did not come open. The wooden-legged man began to get nervous. He started up from his chair. Then the little back door directly behind him burst open. It was filled by a big man with a gun in each hand.

Peg whirled, but one look at the quizzical blue eyes of the stranger told him that to draw would be suicide. A faint laugh came to Peg's ears from below.

The big man stepped into the room, and Ort could see his features more plainly. Peg stared—and knew the reason for that faintly audible laugh. There was the same blond hair and laughing blue eyes. That rock-like, square chin. Shoulders that would fill the door. Glancing down, Peg saw those same incongruously dainty hands. It was Whitey Southern—the Whitey Southern of ten years ago. But it was impossible that the man had not aged! It couldn't be, and yet—there he stood!

Peg saw that Whitey did not recognize him, and knew he had to play on that. The hate of years boiled through him. The only thought in his mind was to kill the man before him.

The big stranger laughed infectiously.

"Shore didn't mean to jump you like this, pardner. Kinda thought maybe I'd find somebody else here. That's a right unsociable hound you got out there."

"Ain't much on takin' up with strangers," Peg answered.

"Like I said," went on the stranger, "I kinda expected to find another feller here. Mind if I look yore house over?"

Without waiting for an answer, Whitey started for the one other room of the cabin. He still held his guns in his hands. Peg cursed softly and followed. The big man's guns swung carelessly toward him.

"Why, I reckon I can look alone, pardner."

Noticing the sound of Peg's wooden leg on the floor, Whitey looked down. Just a flicker came and went in his blue eyes.

"What the hell right," roared the ferryman, "have you got coming in my house like this?"

"All I need is here in my hands, feller!"

Peg subsided. The time wasn't right. Whitey slid through the door sideways. He kept an eye back in the kitchen, but one glance into the other room told him there was no place to conceal a man in there. He stepped back into the kitchen and holstered his guns.

"Maybe I stepped in on you a little fast, but I've been riding the trail of a jigger for

quite a few days. I shore thought he was in here after I found his horse in yore little hide-away barn out there. What you reckon went with that feller?"

"Stranger to me," answered Peg. "Come across on the ferry. Left his horse here and rented one of mine. Didn't say when he'd be back."

"This little ferry, now," went on Whitey. "She shore is right cunnin', the way you've got it tucked away. I'd heard back down the trail a piece there was one here somewhere, but she's hid so good I couldn't find it in the dark. Had to swim my horse across."

There was a deceptive tone in Whitey's voice. Peg knew that the big man was taunting him. He glanced at the holstered guns. Little nerve signals were flashing from his brain. They told him to pull his guns. To blast the big man in front of him down. To shoot and shoot until there was nothing left for him to shoot at.

It was only with the greatest of will power that Peg subdued those white-hot messages. He was a little afraid of Whitey, for the first time in his life. He'd wait just a little longer—until he could get an edge on the big man.

"Why, I just built it down in them little draws so it would be easier to get wagons on and off the boat. Why would I try to hide it? That's the way I make my livin'."

"Don't reckon you make much of a livin' at it, way out here in the badlands," Whitey answered without evident rancor.

He unholstered his guns and laid them on the table. Then he moved over near the little stove.

"Water shore makes a man feel heavy. Reckon I'll dry out some."

Peg's nerves were pricking like white-hot needles. His eyes ran up and down Whitey's body. He could detect no sign of a hidden gun. He knew that he could draw and shoot before the big man could get to those guns on the table. But instead of drawing and blasting lead into Whitey, he couldn't resist taunting the man, now that he had him at his mercy.

"So you're Whitey Southern! You don't look quite like you did ten years ago, but I'd know you any place. I've been hopin' for this day for a long time."

He stooped and pulled his trousers leg up to show the crudely fashioned wooden leg.

"You're goin' to pay for me stumpin' around on that thing all these years. You're goin' to pay the biggest price you can, you stinkin' coyote! I'm collectin' right now!"

With the speed of a striking snake, Peg's hand flashed under his vest. In a blinding arc of light the short-barreled .38 flashed out and bore straight on Whitey's heart. The hammer was on its way back.

With sublime courage, Whitey turned his eyes away from the crazed killer and shook a little piece of paper out of his hand so that Peg could see it. In the light of the lamp Ort could see that it was the torn half of a map. The sight of that crumpled paper drove the ferry-keeper beserk.

"Why, you snake! Still got it! Well, take it right in your yellow guts!" His words tumbled over each other between clenched teeth.

A blazing pencil of red ripped across the room at Whitey. Another followed on its tail with the speed of light. Acrid powder smoke came up between them. Whitey flinched and spun sideways.

Before the concussion could bounce back from the walls another and duller explosion ripped the air. Ort's eyes, wide open in astonishment, looked down at his hand that was slowly relinquishing its hold on the .38. A trickle of red smeared the wrist.

He pulled his eyes away from his hand and looked at the man in front of him. He saw a little two-barreled derringer in Whitey's hand. It had come from under his sleeve on an elastic band.

"A little Texas trick, Peg Ort. I'm still waitin' for that killin'."

The sound of Whitey's voice seemed to pull Peg out of his daze. Unexpectedly he stepped forward and kicked up savagely with his wooden leg. The heavy iron ferrule on the end of it struck Whitey's gun hand. The little gun went spinning across the room. Southern's hand was numb from the terrific blow.

Before he could move Peg had kicked again. This time he caught the other in the groin. A black wave of nausea spread over the big man. He went to the floor, fighting to keep his senses, to prevent that iron-bound club from striking him in the face.

Growling like an animal, Peg recovered his balance and tried to kick Whitey again. With a superhuman effort the other man pulled himself to his knees and clutched at Ort's wooden leg.

He got it before the heavy leg could descend. Bending back, he jerked with all his strength. Peg crashed to the floor, taking the table down with him. Wildly the ferry-keeper tried to grab one of Whitey's guns that had been on the table. Southern smashed him across the arm with the clubbed fist of his left hand. Ort stopped reaching for the gun and hit the other full in the face.

The force of the blow drove Southern from his knees and back to the wall. It was the fraction of time needed for Peg to regain his feet.

The ferry-keeper ran at the big man on the floor and tried to drive his wooden leg into him. Some of the blinding pain had left Whitey. He rolled over and came to his feet as the heavy leg crashed in the door where he had been.

Southern spun and crashed his fist under Peg's ear. It was a blow that would have felled a steer. In his insane frenzy to kill, Peg Ort hardly felt it. He whirled, and the deadly leg barely missed Whitey's stomach.

Again and again Whitey Southern struck at Peg's iron hard chin. The blows seemed to have no effect on the man. From somewhere he produced a long knife. So furious had been the fight that he had not yet had time to pull his other gun. But he lunged out with the wicked looking blade. Whitey, fighting desperately now for his life, struck with his numbed hand. With his left he got Peg's knife hand, but not before he had felt that keen blade sear the muscles of his right arm.

Southern clamped down with all his strength. Peg's arm was like a mighty writhing snake bringing the knife edge ever closer to Whitey's throat. Southern bent his knees and released the pressure slightly on the knife hand. Peg drove in with renewed strength. The maneuver had the desired effect. It gave the big man his opportunity. As Peg's arm went back for the fatal thrust, Whitey forced it suddenly around behind the ferry-keeper.

Pinning his arm in the small of Peg's back, he hunched his huge shoulders upward. The force of the lunge slammed Peg into the wall and pinned him there. Instantly Whitey released the knife hand and wheeled about. Reaching back over his shoulder he grasped Peg's head in his arms, hunched his shoulders and gave a mighty heave.

The force of the maneuver jerked Peg up over those shoulders and sent him flying through the air. He landed against the opposite wall with a sickening crash. The wooden leg smashed into the stove as he fell, and splintered. As it did Whitey saw a little piece of paper flutter out of a cavity in the top of the leg. It was strangely like the one he had shown Peg a few moments before. He started for it.

Only a man with an indomitable will to kill could have remained conscious after such a bone-crashing fall. The ferry-keeper lay as if dead, but his hand was slowly creeping toward that other gun under his shoulder. Whitey Southern, figuring his enemy to be either dead or unconscious, stooped to pick up the piece of paper.

It was that last little flick of movement as the gun came out from under the vest that Whitey saw from the corner of his eye. He dropped to the floor like a pole-axed steer. The shot tore through the air just over his head.

Whitey pushed the broken table top into Peg's face and the next shot went wild. The gun fell to the floor. The big man grasped the badly beaten but still conscious ferry-keeper around the collar and jerked him to his one foot.

Smashing a terrific blow to his chin, Whitey drove Peg across the room and into the wood pile beside the wrecked stove. The ferry-keeper had all a human frame can stand. He slumped down and lay quiet. Whitey leaned against the wall sucking in great lungfuls of air.

His eyes searched the room until he found the paper again. Picking it up, he matched the torn edges with the half that he had. They fitted perfectly. With a glance at the markings on the map, he put both halves into his pocket. Then he started across the room to see if the other man was dead. He bent over—and saw that the woodpile had been pushed aside, revealing a corner of the trapdoor under it.

Whitey came to his feet like a cat. Scooping one of his guns up off the floor, he pushed Ort's body to one side and jerked the trapdoor open.

"Come up out of there, Kid!"

There was silence in the "hotel" for a moment, and then the sound of wood being broken.

"Come out of there or I'll collect yore head money right now!"

"It's a free country," rasped the Kid from the darkness. "Come down and get me, you damned law dog."

A grim smile on his lips, Whitey leaped down into the dark hole. Before he even landed, he was struck a numbing blow in the ribs. Dropping to the floor, he spun in the direction from which the blow had come and lunged at the smaller man.

Whitey took another blow before he came to grips with the Kid. Then he had the little killer in his arms and pinned against one of the wall bunks. He smashed his fist to the Kid's face, crossed his left and put another to the same spot. Some of the whip left the outlaw's tense body. Holding him to the wall with one club-like arm, Whitey reached into a shirt pocket and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. With the speed of long practice he snapped them on the Kid's wrists.

Without saying a word, Southern stooped and grasped the slighter man around the waist. In one heave he threw him up through the opening of the trapdoor. Scrambling up after him, the lawman was on the Kid before he could get to his feet. With a key from his shirt pocket he unlocked one of the cuffs. Then he pushed the Kid over to the still unconscious Peg, and locked the two men together.

Venomously Kid Curry glared at Whitey.

"There never was a day or place," he snarled, "that you could do that if I had a gun. Have your fun now, you badge totin' skunk, because someday I'll look at you through the powder smoke. You'll never take me in!"

Southern didn't bother to answer. Now that he had the two men long trails had led him to, he was content. Some of his effervescent good humor began to return. He stripped his shirt and the top of his underwear off and looked at the wicked, bleeding wound on his side.

A snarling sound from the corner turned him around sharply. Peg had come to life and swung with all his feeble strength to the Kid's face. The owl-hooter was trying to reach Whitey's gun where it still lay on the floor.

The big man stepped over to them with a smile on his lips.

"Cut it out, you two, or I'll work on you some more. You two buzzards ought to know each other better. If you'll be right good li'l fellers, I'll tell you a story while

I fix this bullet burn. Now you listen."

He stooped and looked at the Kid. Chuckling to himself he stepped over to the killer and pulled his white shirt out of his pants. From the tail of it he ripped several long pieces and began to bandage his side.

"Yep," Whitey went on, "you jiggers shore ought to know each other better. 'Bout ten years ago Butch and his gang were breakin' up for the winter. They headed out in all directions. Two of them fellers, one of them knowed as Whitey Southern and the other as Dude Ort, hit the trail together.

"A few months before they'd run onto an old duffer up in the hills who used to ride with the Dalton boys. Claimed to know where the Daltons had buried a lot of bullion once when they was hard pressed. This old duffer sold them two fellers a map.

"They tore it in halves and each took one. They figured to keep it quiet and not let Butch or any of the other boys know about it. When they separated, they'd dig it up.

"Them two fellers headed out East from the Hole-in-the-Wall. They was camped the second night out. This Whitey feller went out in the dark to gather up a little wood for the fire. While he was gone, Dude thought he heard something where the horses were staked out.

"He went out to look. He wasn't out far when a rope snapped over his shoulders and he was dragged off his feet. A man stepped out of the dark and slapped Dude over the head with a gun. This night rider was friskin' Dude right careful when Whitey, who'd heard the ruckus, came tearin' in. He got himself shot right in the briskit by this night rider. It knocked him plumb down and out. But he managed to get a glimpse of this jigger's face before he went down.

"When he come to, he was bleedin' bad and all his pockets was turned inside out. He looked around for Dude and found him down the side of a canyon where the night rider had rolled him. Dude's leg was mashed under him and he was so smashed up that Whitey figured he was dead.

"After a good many weeks this Whitey got down to Mexico. He never rode the owl-hoot again. Instead he built up a good little cow ranch down there, and sent back to Kansas for his wife and boy.

"This Whitey feller died a couple of years back.

"He told me the story that I'm tellin' you buzzards. Rumors drifted down to Old Mex about a pegleg up in this country, named Ort, who said he was aimin' to kill Whitey if he ever saw him. We guessed we knew why.

"Well, me, I never did cotton much to cow work. They made me a U. S. Marshal out of El Paso. To bring this story down to date, I've been trailin' the Kid here for a little job he did down that way. Before my old daddy died he told me which side of the law to keep on. I reckon he knew what was best."

Finished with his bandaging the marshal looked at the sullen pair. A look of fear on the Kid's face contrasted with a light of disbelief in Peg's eyes.

"Peg," said Whitey, "I'm Whitey Southern's son. He didn't rope you like you thought, or roll you for your half of the map.

"The feller that did that was a little killer who'd recently joined up with Butch. He's tied to you right now, Peg!"

As Whitey snapped out these last words his gun came into his hand. He held it on the pair.

"Get up on yore feet, Kid. An' help Peg stand up. We're goin' to saddle some horses and take a ride. After I leave you two at Havre, I'll stop and do a little diggin' on the way back. If I find anything, I'll turn it over to the law. It'll make my old daddy feel better."

The Saga Of The Spur

By

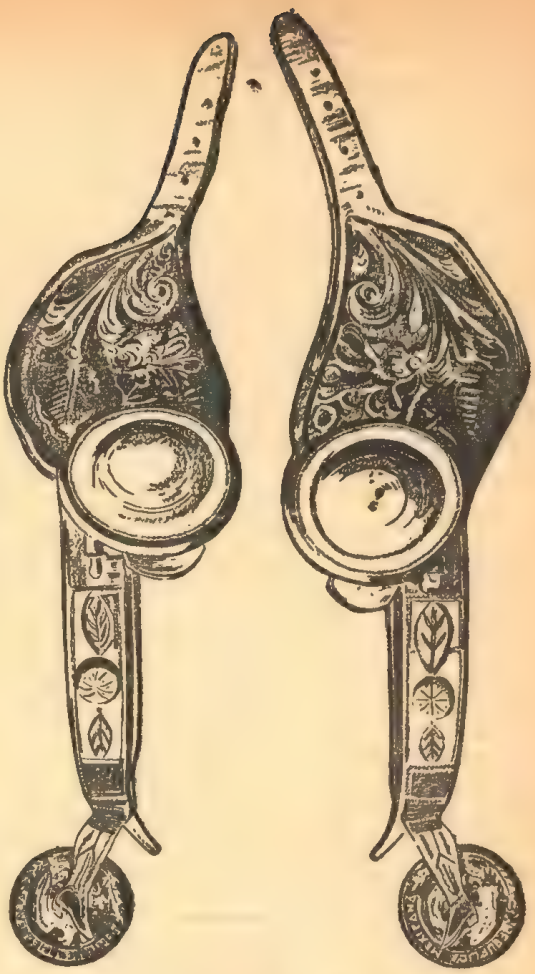
DICK HALLIDAY

Lance And Sword Are Crumbled Rust,
Armor Glints No More,
Still The Chime Of Spurs Is Heard
As In The Days Of Yore.
(From a poem by S. Omar Barker)

Through the ages, down to the present day, the horseman's spur has been the symbol of romance and adventure. In the days of chivalry it was the badge of knighthood, to be won only on the battlefield, and was conferred as an honor on the wearer by his king or liege lord.

The Spanish *conquistadores* first introduced spurs to the New World. Theirs were a foot long, not heavy, but so cumbersome that they had to be removed when a man was on foot. Then the Pilgrim Fathers brought the plain, iron spurs of Cromwell's Ironsides with them when they landed on Plymouth Rock. Later the Stuart cavaliers, with ornate spurs strapped to their jack-boots, sailed westward-ho to settle in the Southland.

Thus three different fashions in spurs, be it noted, were brought into this country. That is why, today, we have the Spanish spur in use in California, the plain, prosaic spur of the old Ironsides yet worn all over the Eastern and Southern states,



Modern Texas spurs, silver mounted, rowels made from old Mexican dollars. Given to the author by Villa.

and the "Texas" spur of the present day, copied from the Cavalier spurs of Virginia and Maryland.

Spanish spurs, as first introduced to the West, were sharp, and the reckless abuse of them is the one big blot on Spanish horsemanship. Even now the elaborate, handmade, silver-mounted spurs used in California, Nevada and Oregon are all fitted with pointed rowels which readily draw blood.

Even the Texas type formerly had sharp rowels. About 1920 Bud Kelly, a Texas cowboy spurmaker, first introduced thick, blunt rowels into modern Texas spurs, and today east of the Slope sharp rowels are seldom used.

Sharp spurs are not needed. Yet in

California, where horsemanship is a science, only one spurmaker, Forest Armstrong, himself an ex-cowboy and a native son, makes spurs with blunt rowels.

In actual use the spur is a necessity. If used correctly, a trained horse will answer a touch of the spur even as a boat will respond to its helm. But sharp spurs are now in the discard, except on the Pacific slope and in the South American republics. Hunting men, polo players, Western cowboys, cavalrymen—all use dummy or blunt spurs.

The records of old world chivalry are full of stories in which the spur played its part. And in the New World, from the Cavalier days of the South down to the present, the chiming of spurs has accompanied stories of romance and adventure and deeds of derring-do as thrilling as any the troubadours sang about.

In the early days of the Rocky Mountain Trapper's Brigade Jim Bridger, famous scout of the Old West, came into possession of a pair of Spanish spurs inlaid with gold and set with rubies. He traded an Indian chief a pair of flintlock pistols for them. How they came into the Indian's hands he never knew.

Later these spurs were stolen from the trapper by a Canadian half-breed. Single-handed, old Jim trailed the thief down. He found him with a gang of renegades, Indians, whites and breeds, twelve in all. Even for a reckless frontiersman like Jim Bridger that was long odds.

Men made their own laws on the frontier then. Jim clung doggedly to the trail until he saw his chance. He caught the gang in camp when their horses were grazing out of sight. He ran the horses off, leaving the outlaws on foot.

While they were hunting the horses, he rode into their camp, shot the two men left there on guard, picked over the outfit and found his spurs. Then he packed up the best of the outfit, brought in his pack horses and loaded them with the loot.

By chance he rode right into a group of five of the renegades coming back to their camp. Old time mountain men were never good horsemen and the trapper could not handle his pack-train under fire. He stampeded them, took to the timber and began to shoot.

No one saw that fight—but Jim rode back to his friends with his jewelled spurs on his heels and leading a string of pack-horses, tied nose to tail.

Bridger did not tell the story until a year afterwards, when he gave those spurs to Tracy Caldwell, a wagon-train guide on the Oregon Trail. On the way, young Caldwell had fallen in love with pretty Mollie Baker, who was being courted by a farmer in the train. But that farmer, in his cowhide boots and rough homespun, stood no chance. Tracy, picturesque in his fringed buckskins, sitting in a California saddle cinched on a mettlesome gray, Jim Bridger's jewelled spurs chiming on his heels, rode headlong into Mollie's life.

Her disgruntled suitor made so much trouble for young Caldwell that the captain of the train judged it best to relax the rules and let them fight it out. The fight drew in the men on guard—and then the Indians swooped down.

The Redskins nearly broke into the wagon-train, being driven off only after desperate fighting. Tracy was wounded twice, getting an arrow in his arm and another in the hip. But his rival in love was dead.

The train stayed in camp until the wounded could travel again—and of course pretty Mollie nursed her frontier cavalier. When the train reached Oregon they were married.

The last time I was there, I stopped at the Caldwell ranch. Over the stone fireplace was hanging a yager rifle, under it the jewelled spurs, their red rubies sparkling against the gleaming gold. And Mollie

Caldwell's granddaughter told me the story of the spurs, which date back, I think, to the Carlist Wars of Spain. Relics of the past in the land from which they came doubtless they have a bloody history behind them. But to the Caldwells of today they are the symbols of romance, ad-

venture, and achievement in the days when the West was young.

In the early days of the West, except for a few pairs of the old Cavalier spurs, all spurs were of the plain Colonial type, like the ones used today in the East. But the prairie traders, trailing their wagons to Sante Fe, brought back Spanish saddles, spurs and bridles. These, being well suited to frontier requirements, were copied by Eastern saddlers, spurmakers, and blacksmiths until they became standard.

But Texas, lying slightly off the beaten track of Yankee emigration, developed a distinct style of spur to the Spanish Californian pattern. The Spanish spur had a straight heelband with a small button on the end to loop the spur-leathers on, with heel chains passing under the instep to hold it in position on the boot.

When the wearer was on foot his spur rowels dragged on the ground, thus gaining the spurs the name "California dragrowels." The Texas style, evolved from the old European fashion, had swinging buttons to fasten the spur straps, and these buttons held the spur level on the foot.

Another Texas style had the heelbands turning up sharply at the ends, with the spur button well above the heelband. This too held the spur straight and prevented the rowels from trailing on the ground. These spurs were in many ways superior to the California pattern and soon every blacksmith in the Lone Star State took to making them.

Somewhere on the heelband of every pair of modern Texas spurs you will find "Kelly Bros" stamped in very small letters. Not one rider in a hundred could tell you who "Kelly Bros" are or where they live. Behind those two words is the story of a young cowboy who turned an accident into an asset and, without advertising, made "Kelly's" a part of modern Southwestern vocabulary.

Years ago Bud Kelly was a young cowboy riding on a Panhandle ranch. His bit and spurs were of rough country blacksmith make. One day his pony fell and he broke a spur. When he tied it up with his reins the animal pulled back and broke a bit.

No stores were handy in which to buy new goods so he forged a bit and spurs to suit his own tastes in the ranch blacksmith shop. When they were finished the foreman of the ranch bought them. Kelly made another set—the tophand insisted on having them. Then other cowboys wanted spurs and bits like these, so Bud laid off riding and turned to the forge.

The reputation of his goods traveled far and wide. He abandoned the range, opened a shop in Dalhart, took in a brother as partner and established a spur and bit business. That business grew and grew until "Kelly's" were found on every range in the West.

Then the Kellys moved to El Paso. Now they have a modern bit and spur factory making a hundred and twenty-nine different styles of spurs and forty-four patterns of bits. Their goods are known in every riding country in the world—even in Afghanistan and Ethiopia. It was a South American mining engineer who told me that Butch Cassidy, of the Wild Bunch, took a pair of Kelly spurs with him to the Argentine and that he was wearing them when killed.

The old world and the new are linked by a pair of spurs hanging behind the altar in the chapel at the Rancho de Ayala in Sonora, Old Mexico. They are jewelled spurs, worth much money, but no thief would dare to steal them. *Los Espuelas del Esfanto* they are called, and they carry a curse laid on them long years ago. Guarded they are, it is said, by the shade of a priest whose bones rest in far-off Spain.

Once they belonged to a Spanish knight who looted a church in Spain and left the priest dying at the foot of the ravished altar. The high-born thief melted down the golden altar vessels. Some of the rubies and emeralds he had set in his spurs, unaware that the priest had lived long enough to set the solemn curse of the Church on the stolen gold and gems.

For a while that knight prospered. When later, for political reasons he fled Spain, he took with him his spurs and what was left of the stolen gold. In Mexico he became a soldier fighting against the Yaquis. But none of his campaigns were successful and it is said that during his last fight, when his routed men were fleeing, he whirled his horse and charged the Indians by himself.

But, so the *paisanos* whisper, the truth is that a ghost rode behind him, a ghastly wraith in priestly robes who held his reins and forced him to spur his horse straight at the Indians. The Yaquis saw that grisly shade behind the living man and they fled in terror. The soldiers found their leader and his horse dead on the battlefield, no mark on the horse, no wound on the man.

When they carried the body back for burial, Padre Francisco refused to admit them to the chapel. The dead man was not allowed to rest in consecrated ground, for the curse of Heaven had been laid upon him. He was buried on the range. The sergeant took his spurs and wore them. And two days later the sergeant was found dead, a Yaqui arrow quivering in his throat.

A soldier stole those spurs from the dead man's heels. A stallion, maddened by their lancing rowels, threw and killed him. And after that every man who wore those splendid spurs came to some sudden, violent end.

Then the matter came to the notice of the old padre. He promptly took possession of them and hung them on the wall,

behind the altar. He told his flock the story of the knight and the golden spurs. They hang on that wall today, unguarded despite their value, for no thief, *bandito* or *buscadero*, dares take them down.

The rubies that flame blood-red in tooled gold inlays on heelband, rowels, and buckles carry the solemn curse of excommunication—that curse pronounced with bell, book, and candle which follows forever those who steal the consecrated ornaments of an altar of the Holy Church. Even the reckless Pancho Villa, whose boast it was that he feared neither God, man, nor the devil, forbore his reaching hand when Pablo Lopez, with ashen, trembling lips, told him the story of those spurs, of *los Espuelos del Esfanto.*

But few of the annals of chivalry could match the dashing, reckless story of young Denny Holbrooke and his spurs. Denny was a cowboy on a Border ranch. He owned spurs forged from plain steel by an oldtime cowboy spurmaker. All through the winter in his spare time Denny worked on those spurs, inlaying them with silver flowers set with turquoise. They were the pride of his heart and the envy of his friends.

Then he went over the Border as foreman for an American cattle company. Torn by revolutions, overrun with bandits, Sonora was a place where often a man's life hung on the speed of his gun-hand and his skill in placing lead. For the herds of the Yankees were rich quarry for revolutionary leaders with many hungry mouths to fill.

The Mexican fancy runs to fine horse-trappings and those splendid spurs made the young cowboy a marked man. Men tried vainly to buy them. Three times bandits attempted to waylay him. Then a *pelado* stole them.

But Denny had staunch friends among the *vaqueros,* for his mother was the daughter of a *haciendadero* whose family were loved for their kindness to the poor. So, through old Pedro Berdugo, the horse-wrangler, Denny heard that a small-fry bandit, one Juan of the Left Hand, so-called because a Yaqui arrow had maimed his right hand, was wearing his prized spurs and bragging of the fact. A dangerous man, old Pedro averred, his left hand trained to speed with gun and knife until it was as fast and deadly as the strike of a rattlesnake.

"A very bad man, young Señor. He kills as one would flick a match. His *mozo* stole your spurs at his master's order. At the Cantina del Oro he stays."

"I'll call on him," said Denny briefly. "No cow-thief like him can keep my spurs while I live."

"We ride with you, Señor, Miguel and I. Of a truth you will need men at your back among those *cabrones.*"

Denny knew that Pedro would offer help. When a man of Mexico gives his friendship he gives his all, even to life itself. Too, the unwritten code of the Border ranges demanded that Denny Holbrooke must recover those spurs, just as a knight of old had to bring back his shield from the battlefield.

They rode south all day, Denny on his Ysabella, a horse that by itself was a passport for its rider in that land. Pedro and his son, Miguel, rode two clean-limbed, wiry *grullas,* highly prized below the Border where men must often ride fast and far.

Santa Anita, one of those hell-dives found only in the bandit belt of Northern Mexico, was their objective. Here, at the Cantina del Oro, Juan and his band of cutthroats held sway. Santa Anita showed every sign of living up to its evil name when the three rode into its single, littered street that night. Dim rays of light filtered from the adobe shacks; the tinkling of guitars, drunken songs, shrill voices of women filled the still night air.

The Cantina del Oro, squat and rambling, faced the squalid plaza in the center of the village. At the hitchrack in front a dozen horses were tied. Silver-crusted saddles on their backs attested that bandits were in town.

The three dismounted at the corner of the building, led their horses off the street. Looping the reins over saddle-horns, they dangled the *mecate* ropes to the ground, ready for a quick getaway. Those three horses were one-man animals. Any thief who reached for the trailing ropes would meet with kicks from steel-shod hoofs and savage bites from fang-toothed jaws. Their riders felt quite safe in leaving them there.

Then, Denny in the lead, his spurless heels tapping on the flagstones, they pushed into the cantina. Two lamps, swinging from the low, black-beamed ceiling, shone golden through clouds of swirling tobacco smoke. A short bar was on one side of the room, a pock-marked Mexican behind it. A few scattered tables and benches served the motley crowd of Border riffraff, lounging and drinking there.

No one noticed them as they fronted the bar. Denny's eyes, searching the room, saw the man for whom he was looking. Behind a table, his back to the wall, sat

Juan of the Left Hand. A small, wiry man, thin-beaked of nose, his sensual mouth curved below a ribbon of black mustache, he sat there, foppishly dressed in gold braided velvet, wisps of smoke curling up from his black-paper cigarette.

Each time that he shifted in his chair the glittering, huge-rowelled spurs on his heels pealed like silver bells. Denny's spurs . . . The cowboy's eyes narrowed as he heard the chiming music of their rowels.

The pock-marked bartender moved up, his beady eyes flickering over the three men.

"*Vino, por tres,*" ordered Denny.

"Aha—*Yanqui?*" Subtle insult rippled in his oily tone.

"No, *hombre,*" corrected the cowboy sharply. "*Texano.*"

The words drew the gaze of the hard-faced riders at the tables. One leaned over, whispered to the leader. The dandified little bandit swung round, chuckled as he spied the stranger at the bar. Dressed as they were in *chivarrias*—the tight-fitting leggings of the *vaquero*—dingy sombreros and faded cotton shirts, Juan of the Left Hand failed to connect the two *vaqueros* with the strange cowboy. He only saw the one rider in jaunty American cowboy dress.

Americanos were not popular at the Cantina del Oro. As he saw one of the despised gringos in Santa Anita, apparently alone, the bandit leader's small, close-set eyes glittered at the thought of the baiting to come.

"*Aviso, gringo,*" he barked, "wat you do 'ere?"

Denny turned, back to the bar. Old Pedro edged off to one side. Miguel dropped back two paces. Their actions were so natural that the Mexican had not the faintest idea that the three might be together.

"Spik up," he snapped, "ees eet that the cat 'as stole the tongue, *gringo?*"

In one acid, biting sentence, with all the insulting inflections one can put into Spanish words, Denny gave him the reason for his coming.

"No cat has my tongue, hombre. But those spurs you are wearing, you *pelado,* you stole them from me! Hand them over."

The stinging words thinned the bandit's lips to a blood red gash. His eyes flashed crimson in sudden rage. The reckless words made him gasp for breath. His shaking hand fumbled at the silver-hilted knife in his sash.

The men, as surprised as their chief.

gaped in sheer astonishment. Then as the import of the words sank home a roar of laughter doubled them up. A gringo cowboy, unarmed—for no guns showed at his belt—foolish enough to ride into Santa Anita to recover his spurs. What a joke was this!

Even Juan's close-set lips grinned wolfishly at the jibes and cat-calls of his men. He sprang up, the silver-hilted knife flashing in his hand. "Watch, *amigos,* see how Juan of the Left Hand will cut this young cockerel's comb."

A flip of his hand, and a streak of silver lightning hummed across the room. But quicker than the knife was Denny's half turn on one boot-heel. The foot-long dagger twanged into the bar, its hilt vibrating a scant six inches from the cowboy's side. For once Juan of the Left Hand had missed his throw.

Chairs pushed back, feet scuffled, guns and knives glinted dully as the wolfish pack closed in to rush an unarmed man. Juan's pearl-handled Colt was in his hand. His eyes glowed as he crouched forward. Now

he would kill this insolent gringo dog who dared to beard him in his own den!

Men crouched for the rush that would pull the cowboy down by weight of numbers. Suddenly Denny's hands moved. Two blue army automatics were conjured into his grasp. More, the two strange *vaqueros* had pulled their long-barrelled sixes and stepped up level with him.

Startled and shocked by the unexpected sight of those guns, the renegades crouched back like runners waiting for the starter's signal. Then in one powder-blasted moment the storm broke. A man at the back of the room fired hastily and missed.

Denny's hands lifted; his automatics rattled lightning fast. The two hanging lamps dissolved in a tinkle of breaking glass. One, blazing, smashed to the floor like a falling comet. The spilled oil flared up, lighting the scurrying, scrambling figures of cursing men seeking safety as the thundering roar of guns shook the room.

The flame died down, but scarlet streaks criss-crossed the darkness. Men were firing wildly, triggering at every sound they heard. As men were hit and fell, the panic became wilder. Each man thought that Denny and his two companions were shooting them down, one by one.

Those still on their feet made a frantic rush for the door, and silence fell on the room. Even the wounded stopped their clamor in sudden, panic-stricken fear.

"Miguel?"

"*Si,* Señor. Wait—I make thees peeg mak' light."

Under the prodding of Miguel's gun, the terrified bartender lit a candle. The smoke-filled room was a shambles. Dead and wounded men were huddled on the floor. In one corner, across the top of a table, the body of Juan of the Left Hand sprawled limply, a bullet through his head.

"*En verdad,* Señor," gasped Pedro, crossing himself at sight of the bodies on the blood-stained floor. "But you are a deadly fighter, no?"

"Not I, *amigo mio.* Those men fought against themselves. Our plan worked. I shot out the lights, then you and Miguel hid behind the bar. I was on the floor. I shot at Juan there. Maybe I hit him, maybe not."

He pressed fresh clips into his automatics, turned to the frightened, shivering bartender.

"Here, you! Take my spurs off that dead thief's heels."

Hastily the man obeyed. At a prompting gesture from Pedro's Colt, he dropped to his knees and buckled the spurs on Denny's boots.

How do I know this story? you ask. Pedro Berdugo told me, and Pedro was there. Denny Holbrooke is a friend of mine. I was the man who showed him how to file a triangular hole in the rowels of those spurs so that they would ring like the music from distant mission bells.

Chiming through the ages, from the steel-shod days of old down to the present, the jingle of spurs has been the music of riding, fighting men. Even in our prosaic Machine Age spurs, the badge of honor and knighthood, still chime the songs of fighting men as they jingle at the heels of our last Cavalier—the cowboy of the West.

TWO TOUGH TAILS

By

S. OMAR BARKER

Dawgs Is Dawgs, But None Could Compare To The Two Pirootin' Pinto Pups That Ran The Range With Boosty Peckleberry . . .

"I been readin'," said Biff Wilkins, "'bout these here German police dawgs, which they say is smarter than a cowboy that's been to collidge an' caught education. It says all you got to do is show him the picture of an outlaw took about the time he first begun wipin' his own nose an' he'll go find him as sure as the owls lay spotted eggs."

"Owls don't lay eggs," grunted Bran Mash Mullens, "spotted nor otherwise. They steals 'em from the chickens, hides 'em in a wolf's ear to hatch an' save theirselves the wear an' tear of nestin'. You ever see an ol' owl settin' on a nest like any civilized bird?"

"Come to think of it, I never," agreed Banty McGinnis, "though I ain't spent no time to speak of goin' around liftin' owls to see what they was settin' on. But how the cross-eyed hades does a chicken egg hatch out anything but a chicken?"

"It don't," grinned Biff. "They are chickens when they hatch. It's the unhuman way the owls raise 'em that makes hooties out of 'em. But about these here smart police dawgs. It says here—"

"Hoss radish!" Old Boosty Peckleberry paused to set down the garden rake he was using to comb out the far ends of his hosstails with. "Modern dawgs ain't no smarter than dawgs always was if they had anybody jest half as smart as they was to learn 'em. I recollect—"

Them rabbits was a-whirlin' ol' Bat around, jest like a drill a-borin' for water.

"But you take a dawg. Supposin' he's as plumb smart as a red ant huntin' a syrup can—what use is he in a cow country outside of layin' under the wagon fer the cookie to throw dishwater on?" Bran Mash fished a coal from the fire to light his smoke. "There ain't but two animals worth a white man's notice anyways—a cow critter an' a hoss to ketch it on."

"I wouldn't say that," protested the new hand named Lufe. "My uncle had a pair of ketch dawgs down in Texas that'd bring an ol' bull outa the brush where Tom Thumb couldn't ride on a Shetland pony. My uncle says them ketch pups was worth ary dozen cowhands that ever gnawed a raw turnip. He says—"

"What ever give you the idee that cowhands gnaw raw turnips?" broke in Bran Mash belligerently. "But you take a dawg. What kin he do but bark, bite an' bat his tail around? Nossir, you cain't tell me—"

"Nature must of had some idee what she was doin' when she give them sech a crooked hine leg," offered Banty McGinnis. "I knowed an ol' hound once, that if you'd tickle his hine foot between the toes with a grass stem he'd kick the cork right out of a bottle fer yuh. An' what's furthermore—"

"Dawgs is dawgs," interpose old Boosty Peckleberry firmly. "An' a heap of 'em ain't worth savin' a gnawed bone fer; but if you shorthorns thinks a couple of capabie canoodlin' canines cain't give a good account for their keep in the cow country, jest cock them cabbage leaves you calls your ears thisaway an' lemme relate you the facts about a pair of pirootin' pinto pups that run the range with me back in the days when men was men an' the timber wolves sung bass."

Mr. Boosty Peckleberry tied up the plaited ends of his six-foot hosstails with red ribbons torn from an old suit of bull-flag underwear and r'ared back to orate. Under the compelling gaze of his bristle-browed optics the bunkhouse boys lay back to listen as meek as a muley cow in a herd of longhorns.

Yes sir, gents an' jugheads, he said, dawgs is dawgs. But the dawgiest dawggone dawgies that ever ducked from a wolf was them two towsers of mine, Bat-Tail Bohunkus and Frog-Fanner Fido, which I gen'rally called Bat an' Frog for short.

I was jest a young sprout in them days. My mustaches wasn't much over a foot long, silky as a calf's ear, an' like many another winsome waddy of the wastelands I was foolin' around courtin' me a gal. It was a time of drouth, an' I was ridin' for the Drag-Belly M as a water-duster, it bein' my job to lope up an' down the Pecos an' the Rio Grande an' Canadian an' all them cricks on my ol' jassack, sweepin' the dust off'n the water so's the cattle could find it.

How come me ridin' a mule? Why durin' this drouth the cattle was so starved to where if a man rode a hoss they'd run theirselves to death tryin' to eat off'n his tail—the hoss's not the man's—it bein' the closest thing to look like grass most of 'em had ever saw. But although a mule's tail fastens on in the same gen'ral neighborhood, it hangs somewhat higher to where the cows couldn't reach it. How come they couldn't reach it? Why the cattle traveled so much huntin' grass that year that their legs was wore off up to the knees. You'd see an ol' speckled cow not over two foot high takin' after a rattlesnake to graze off his rattles an' sometimes you'd have to dab a loop on her to make sure she wasn't one of ol' Pecos Bill's giant horny-toads, she'd look so squatty.

'Course you've heard tell of Pecos Bill's giant horny-toads? Dairy stock they was. Pecos was gittin' rich shippin' horny-toad butter to Africa and Alabama an' all them hot countries on account it wouldn't melt in the heat like cow butter. 'Course I wouldn't of give a tick's tizzick how rich he got, only he was courtin' the same gal that I was at the time an' he could bring

her the present of a wagon load of licorish candy ever' Sunday, where about the best I could do was a bag of peppermint sticks. It kep' me studyin' like a short-tailed bull in fly time to think up presents to bring her so's to keep up with ol' Pecos Bill. Absence may make the heart grow fonder, like the feller says, but it's presents that hog-ties the heifers in the bonds of love.

Well, sir, I shore figgered I had ol' Rosie Romance by the tail with a downhill pull when I run into these here long tailed dawgs an' set out to take them to this cutie for a sparkin' present. I knowed she never had no dawgs to speak of, outside of the eight or nine her ol' daddy kept around for footwarmers in the winter, an' I figgered she'd shore be pleased with ol' Frog-Fanner an' Bat.

Didn't I ever tell you 'bout this gal? Her name was Cassandrina Squattin' Cow, bein' three-quarters Injun on her parents side, an' a cousin to ol' Sittin' Bull. But she went mainly by the nickname of Cuckleburr Kate for short. Boys, she was a beaut! Hair as auburn as sunset over a herd of red hawgs, with here an' there a few cuckleburrs ornamentin' its heersootical handsomosity. Skin as soft an' brown as a pair of mail order chaps after a big rain.

An' curves! Gents, you should of seen the delikitt crooks an' turns of that gentle damsill's nose! But it was her perfeck teeth that I admired more'n anything else, perticklerly them two that extended down so gracefully acrost her lower lip where you could always have a good look at 'em.

Gents, she was as young an' fair a filly as ever stubbed her toe on a frozen buffalo chip. Even though her ol' man maybe was a little bit whiffy on the lee side, Cuckleburr Kate shore was the perfeck gal to give a dawg to.

That summer it got even drouthier than usual, so one day I come to a stretch of the Rio Grande where there wasn't no more water than there is fiddlers in heaven. Even the frogs had took out to the mesquite flats, so I could see by the tracks. There bein' no water to dust off, I taken a notion to foller 'em an' see how they was makin' out. Gents, that's how come me to make the acquaintance of them two remarkable dawgs I'm tellin' you about.

'Bout a quarter mile from the dry river bed all them frogs was gathered in the shade of an' ol' cottonwood. Settin' on a log right in the big middle of 'em was a gant shanked ol' whiskerino playin' "Ain't Gonna Rain No More" on a mouth harp, an' them frogs was bellerin' with him fit to kill. But what made my eyes bug out was them dawgs. They was both of 'em plain ol' spotted cur-dawgs, 'bout the color of mustard spilt in the black-strap, but one of 'em was a long-haired an' feather-tailed whilst the other 'un was as slick an' short-haired as the saddle-rubbed side of a cowboy's leg.

It was the feather-tailed 'un that I took notice of first, for believe it or go suck owl eggs, gents, that ol' purp was jest a-weavin' in an' out amongst them frogs, a-wavin' his tail to beat the bandmaster.

"Howdy, mister," I hails the ol' whiskerino. "What the hell's hine side is goin' on here?"

He lets up blowin' the harp long enough to answer me.

"Why," he says, "if it's any skin off'n your untidy nose, me an' the dawgs has got to keep these sheep cooled off, or they won't grow any wool."

"Sheep?" I says. "Them's frogs!"

"Well," he argues, "it *was sheep* I druv in to water an' lost sight of in the dust. It ain't my fault if they come out frogs. Wup, there! Hold 'em, Bohunkus!"

Then I persoove what them dawgs was up to. The feather-tailed 'un was runnin' around fannin' them frogs with his tail to keep 'em cool an' comfuttable, and the bat-tailed 'un, everwhen an' ol' bullfrog would git discouraged an' start to hop towards

the river agin, why *swish!* This ol' dog would swing that six foot knotty lookin' tail of his an' bat him back.

"Granpaw," I says, for I shore hankered to have them smart purps, "what'll you take fer these cannies?"

"Cain't sell 'em," he says, "as long as I got these dang sheep on my hands."

So I says how much fer the dawgs with the frogs throwed in, so he studies a minute an' allows they oughta be worth a million anyways, but he'll take three dollars if I'll throw in a plug of chawin'.

So the next time he opened his mouth I throwed it in. For I figgered if ol' Pecos Bill could git rich off'n a herd of horny-toads, why couldn't I do likewise an' more so off'n a flock of fourteen hundred an' thirty-one frogs not countin' the tadpoles?

Well, that evenin' me an' the dawgs started up the trail with them frogs. Frog-Fanner Fido taken the lead, wavin' his tail to stir up a cool breeze, an' the frogs, mistakin' it for the wind off'n a pond of water somewheres, they hopped right along after him, an' them that lagged, ol' Bat-Tail Bohunkus kept battin' 'em with his tail. So we traveled along right smooth, an' all I had to do was jog along an' dream of the day when Cuckleburr Kate would be mine, to have an' to hold a bullwhip over whilst she herded my frogs.

It wasn't hardly over a thousand miles frum there to the Heap Big Smellum Mountains where she lived, so I aimed to drift my frog herd up there, make her a present of the dawgs, pop the question, then question Pop about helpin' me brand my frogs, an' settle down to a life of domesticated bliss raisin' frog fur an' papooses.

Y'know there was right smart of a markit for frog fur them days. Prince Bogus, the Boss Buck of Blookistan, had wrote to old Andy Jackson that he'd buy all the frog fur us Americans could perduce. Claimed that frog-fur pyjammers beat silk all holler to dress his harems in. Now don't you ask me why. I ain't no Arabian Knight.

Gents, it looked like my fortune was done made. Ol' Pecos Bill with his Horny-Toad Dairy would be mighty small pertaters 'longside of me an' my Frog Fur Ranch, with Cuckleburr Kate an' my two dawgs to herd 'em.

How come I lost them frogs? Why it was a stampede. You know how the French is about froglegs? Well, a bunch of them wild Parleyvoo trappers of ol' Kit Carsons got into my frog herd one night an' started yankin' off hine legs, so them frogs jest up an' stampeded. Gents, did you ever try to stop a frog stampede? You jest as well to try an' head off a sandstorm with a peekaboo shirtwaist.

Next day we set out to round 'em up agin. Now you talk about useful dawgs! That Bat-Tail shore had him a powerful ground-whacker. I tied a knot in the end of it, an' we'd go around on the flats an' the dawg would lay down an' thump his tail on the ground so hard if there was a frog hid out anywheres within a quarter of a mile it would bounce him right up in sight. Trouble was, it kep' ol' Fanner flappin' *his* tail too, fannin' down all the lizards an' Heely Monsters Bat's tail would bounce up outa their holes.

First week we found nary a frog, they'd run so fur. But the next week we begun to locate 'em, one or two at a place. But it wasn't no use. Without that ol' Fanner dawg's tail breeze to keep 'em cool ever dang one of them frogs had dried out as flat as an ol' maid's pancakes, to where they couldn't travel. So I jest had to give it up complete an' leave 'em where they was.

Maybe you've noticed how when it rains about ever' seven years out on these New Mexico flats, there's frogs comes to life ever'wheres an' lets in to croak. Maybe you've wondered how come frogs to be in such places? Well, now you know: them's the frogs an' their oftspring that I lost in that there stampede.

But I set out to relate you about them

dawgs. They wasn't no fancy breed. Jest ol' yaller-brown cur-dogs. Both of 'em the same color, with a sprinklin' of black an' white spots. Only Frog-Fanner wore his hair long an' a feather-tail, whilst Bat was plumb smooth, with a tail jest about like a knotty pitchfork handle only maybe not quite so limber. Seem like they'd realized right off that I was their equal, if not superior, an' they took to me like a drownin' hoss takes to an island.

Even after losin' our frogs, I figgered that by the time I'd git to Cuckleburr Kate's with them pups, I'd have 'em learnt a right smart that'd be of use to us besides howlin' at the moon.

Well, we wasn't hardly onto the trail agin, after givin' up the frog hunt, when we come onto ol' Uncle John Chisum workin' a roundup. Ol' John looked mighty sober an' fretted.

"Cousin Boosty," he says, "I'm a-havin' more trouble than a short-tailed bull in fly time. It's this here drouth," he says. "My cattle is so parched that ever' time I smack the hot iron onto a calf to brand him, he ketches fire, an' without no water to throw on him, he jest plumb burns to a cinder. Not that I'm brandin' anyhow today, because this hot wind has burnt up ever' dang lass rope in the outfit, to where my boys cain't even ketch the calves to ear-mark 'em. An' as if that wasn't enough, here you come with a couple of dang cur-dawgs, which, if the herd ketches sight of 'em it'll spook an' stampede as shore as a nigger'll run apast a graveyard. I wisht—hey, call them dawgs back away frum that herd, before they—"

But he needn't to of worried. Them dawgs wasn't headin' for the herd. They'd jumped a jack rabbit an' was runnin' him off the other way. It was right purty the way they worked that ol' jack. First they laned him till they had him runnin' in a circle, then ol' Bat jest stepped over to the middle of the circle an' stuck out his tail, whilst Frog kept the rabbit circlin'. Natcherly, when the jack seen that tail of ol' Bat's stickin' out like a fence rail in front of him he had to jump it. He made it easy enough the first time around, an' the second. By the third his hine feet was kinder draggin', an' about the thirteenth time around he jest couldn't make it, an' he hit his chin on that hard ol' knotty tail of Bat's, an' down he went for the count.

Quick as I noticed them dawgs didn't pounce on him an' eat him, I surmised they had somethin' up their sleeves. But even when they dragged this jack to a mesquite bush an' anchored him by hangin' him onto a coupla thorns by the ears, I didn't savvy what. Gents, by the time we'd et our dinner them pups had forty-six jackrabbits hung up by the ears around there. Then they went trottin' off down the draw into an ol' dry river bed, as full of business as a hawg huntin' a corn patch.

Purty soon I heard a thump-thump-thump. Then purty soon thump-thump-thump agin.

"What's that?" says Uncle John. "Somebody comin' on a three-legged hoss?"

So I told him it was jest ol' Bat beatin' the ground with his tail, like as not tryin' to bounce out some more rabbits. Well, it *was* ol' Bat's tail thumpin' the ground all right, but not for rabbits. Nossir, he'd heard ol' Uncle John complain of the dryness an' he was takin' a sounding for water, though I didn't reelize it at the time.

Well, after awhile the thumpin' stopped, an' purty soon here come them dawgs to git their rabbits. Them ol' jacks had shore 'nough been knocked cold, for ol' Frog begun unhookin' 'em from the mesquite thorns an' draggin' 'em off down the dry wash with nary a kick frum a one of 'em.

Meanwhile, ol' Bat come amblin back to the wagon. He come to me kinder whinin', so I throwed him a chunk of biskit. But that wasn't what he wanted, so he begun nosin' around the wagon, an' the cook, who was whettin' a butcher knife, throwed the

whetstone at him. Believe it or go suck own eggs, gents, Bat caught that whet stone, taken it an' wedged it up aginst the wagon tongue, backed up to it an' began whippin' his tail back an' forth acrost it. Yessir, he stood there an' whetted his tail till the end was sharp as them handsome front teeth of Cuckleburr Kate's.

"What the hinges of hades is them dawgs up to?" asks Uncle John Chisum. But I couldn't tell him, even though they was my dawgs, an' I ort to of knowed.

About an hour later we found out. We rode down the dry wash where they'd gone with them rabbits, an' we come up on a sight the like of which I ain't never saw before nor since. I wisht you could of viewed it for yourselves, gents, because it ain't right easy to describe.

Anyways, there was ol' Bat settin' up endways with the end of his tail stuck in the ground, bracin' hisself with his hine feet an' his front legs stuck straight out in the air as stiff as pokers. An' there was them forty-six rabbits runnin' around him in a circle. Now ol' Frog was a right smart smaller dawg than Bat, an' there he was crouched down inside the circle, with his head towards them circlin' rabbits, gently fannin' his feathery tail, an' ever so often he would give a little yelp. An' ever time he'd yelp some of them dizzy jackrabbits would stiffen their ears like the jack always does when somethin' kinder startles him; an' them stiffened ears would hit ol' Bat's outstretched front paws an' it would jerk him around for a short whirl. Pivoted on his tail like he was, it worked him jest like a ratchet auger.

It fact, that's exactly what it was. Them pups had tail-thumped around in that dry wash till they hit a place that sounded like there might be water under, an' there they was, drillin' a well. Ol' Bat was the drill rig, borin' with his tail for the drill. Them rabbits hittin' his front paws with their ears was furnishin' the power. An' ol' Frog was not only bossin' the job with his yelps, but also was fannin' the drill to keep it cool.

How come they could keep them rabbits circlin' thataway? Why, they'd circled them rabbits an' got 'em dizzy in the first place, an' now they had 'em circlin' the other way, unwindin' their dizziness, that's all.

What worried me was whether they'd hit water before ol' Bat's tail was sunk in plumb to the hilt, an' before them rabbits got their dizziness unwound an' quit the circle. But luck was with 'em. Bat's rump was jest beginnin' to brush the ground an' all but seven rabbits had quit 'em when they hit an artesian gusher that blowed the whole outfit forty feet in the air. I jerked off my saddle an' throwed out the blanket for 'em to land on, an' they wasn't neither of 'em hurt.

So we had water, an' ol' John Chisum was able to git on with his brandin' without burnin' up all his drouthy calves.

'Course we all got purty wet in the drizzle. What say? Shore I said drizzle! Whilst we worked the herd ol' Frog-Fanner stood patiently off a quarter to the west fannin' that spoutin' artesian water out over us jest like a soft an' soothin' rain.

After that I couldn't hardly wait to git on my way to show the Belle of the Heap Big Smellum Mountains what a smart pair of pooches I'd brung her.

But seems like it was a mighty long trail, gents, because for the next several years them drouth-burnt cowmen drug me an' my pups all over the dang southwest tail-thumpin' for water an' drillin' wells. We brung in 934 wells of artesian water an' one of black strap syrup. Seem like ol' Bat happened that time to thump water where a chuck wagon had been washed under in a flood an' bored right into the ol' lick barrel.

Sometimes the wells wasn't artesian—which means the water would not squirt of its own free will, but had to have a wind-

THE MASTER THRILLER NOVELS

* *

DEAD MAN INSIDE
Vincent Starrett

MURDER ON B DECK
Vincent Starrett

FOOLS OF THE LEGION
J. D. Newsom

BLOOD ON THE HEATHER
Stephen Chalmers

MURDER AT GLEN ATHOL
Norman Lippincott

MURDER AT FOUR DOT RANCH
F. L. Gregory

SHARK GOTCH OF THE ISLANDS
Albert Richard Wetjen

MURDER AT THE OLD STONE HOUSE
Charlotte Murray Russell

* *

NOW 3/6 NET

mill to pump it out. Then maybe the wind wouldn't blow an' I'd have to stick around a week whilst ol' Frog set up on a fence post an' fanned up a breeze with his tail.

It was while he was busy breeze-makin' that I learnt ol' Bat to go up in the brush hills an' chouse out the wild cattle. Now any dawg can run an' ketch a cow by the tail. But he purty quick off rips her tail in his teeth an' she gits away.

But ol' Bat would first ketch the tail in his teeth, then turn a double somersault that would give it a double, two-time, cross-stitch, quiltin'-knot half hitch or dally around that stiff tail of his, then let go with his teeth, an' he had her. All he had to do then, was drag her in.

Only one time he hit what he taken to be a bobtailed ol' shag-back of a cow, an' her tail was too short for the half hitch, not bein' over half a inch of it, from root to tassel. The facks is, it wasn't no cow at all, but a big ol' bull bear, an' ol' Bat had him quite a struggle.

I was settin' on a hillside an' seen what was happenin' down in the canyon, so I taken out down there as quick as I could. But I needn't to of been worried. Ol' Frog had heard Bat yelpin' like he was in trouble, an' he'd quit the windmill he was fannin', climbed on his hoss (both of 'em was tophand saddle setters by then) an' come jest a-rackin' to help him.

Time I got down there through the timber they done had that ol' bear whipped to where he was carryin' the dirt away for 'em whilst they dug out a nest o' prairie dawgs. That was their weakness, gents. Them pups loved to dig out prairie dogs.

What had they done to the bear? Well, as near as I could figger it, they'd took turns snappin' his tail till they whittled it into an arrow point, then throwed owl eggs in his face an' backed him into one of them cork bark fir trees, an' there he stuck. An' don't tell me them wasn't owl eggs, neither, for I seen the shells an' heard an ol' hen owl boo-hoooin' over the loss of 'em right up over where the bear's tail had stuck in the tree. Why—what say?

Now listen to your Uncle Boosty, you sneerin' shorthorns! I can show you hundreds of them very dog-drilled wells all over them flats plumb to this day, an' if you ever been around Santa Rosa, New Mexico, you've seen all them big sinkholes that caved in on account of Frog an' Bat burrowin' so deep fer prairie dawgs, an—

"What I'm plumb famished to know," busted in Banty McGinnis, "is the romantical end of this here dog tale. What I crave to hear is how Cuckleburr Kate liked them dawgs when you bring 'em to her?"

"I couldn't tell you, son, for I never did give 'em to her."

"Did she marry you anyways?" asked Lufe.

"I never did git there to ask her," confessed Mr. Peckleberry. " 'Course she would of if I had, there hain't a doubt. But endurin' the five years I was well drillin' with them pups she got kinder impatient, I reckon, an' married ol' Pecos Bill.

"Myself, I never did see her no more. I'd had to give her up on account of them very dawgs I'd aimed to win her by makin' her a present of."

For a few moments there was silence in the bunkhouse. Then—

"Well," growled Bran Mash Mullens, "what the hell happened to the dawgs?"

"Pore ol' Frog-Fanner Fido an' Bat-Tail Bohunkus!" Mr. Peckleberry wiped his eyes with the ends of his hosstails. "They got to diggin' fer prairie dawgs so much that they dug theirselves plumb under. But I cain't believe they're dead."

"What makes you think they ain't?"

"Why, all them dust storms they been havin' all over the southwest. What causes all that dust to fly up in the air thataway if it ain't ol' Bat a-diggin' an' ol' Frog a-fannin' the dirt away with his tail?"

He Had Rustled a Little, Peddled Some Hides, Rifled the Pockets of a Few Drunks, But a Hold-up Was Something New for Salamander Braley

SLAYTON PASSES JUDGMENT

By G. W. BARRINGTON

Author of "Prisoners of the Pocket," "The Sheriff of Two Buttes," etc.

I

SALAMANDER BRALEY saw old Perkins first. Still a quarter of a mile distant up the shallow rock-wash, the new settler's body was hidden. Only the head and shoulders showed; the face, barely discernible, but easily identified by its wispy white mustache and the thick-lensed glasses shimmering in the bright fall sunshine.

"He's comin'," Salamander grunted, snaking his big body back a little further among the low bushes that fringed the wash. Rolling to one elbow, he laid his battered rifle by his side and drew from his hip pocket a red bandanna handkerchief, slit and stringed to form a mask.

"Never mind," Wolf Shivers rumbled at Salamander's side. "Needn't put on that play-pritty to hide that there ugly mug of your'n. I don't figger it'll take both of us to handle th' ol' clod-hopper. Just ease back a little furder an' stay put. I'll make him drop that mazuma, plumb prompt."

Salamander obeyed, without protest. Wolf Shivers' intimates did that, when he spoke.

Besides, the thing looked ridiculously easy. On the day before, Salamander had been in the Antlers Saloon in the sprawled little cowtown out on the flat to eastward. Old Perkins had bargained with Harvey Slater, the proprietor, for six sections of timber and grass land, agreeing to pay five thousand cash for it at the bank, at noon, today.

Salamander had heard the bargain. He never had seen Perkins before, but discreet inquiries developed the information that the old fellow had settled at the point of the ridge with a few dozen thin cows and a

fairly good outfit of work stock and implements. Nester-farmer-rancher.

Salamander hadn't been in the least interested in Old Perkins' stock or his implements or his plans. It was the word "cash" that caused him to shamble unostentatiously out of the saloon and ride down the valley to carry the news to his side-partner in crime, burly Wolf Shivers, prairie vagrant, hide-thief, rustler and small-time hold-up man.

Salamander's own record was a pallid copy of Wolf's. Where the latter had rustled much, Salamander had rustled only a little. As to hides, Salamander had peddled only a few—by-products of illicit beef killing, when his squatter cabin up on the ridge was empty of meat. As to hold-ups, Salamander never had been quite that ambitious. By way of gathering in cash, he had rifled the pockets of a few snoring drunks in the mow of the feedlot; once he had garnered a rich windfall when Pappy Grimes left his pocketbook containing a thousand on the shelf in front of the postmaster's wicket, and Salamander had happened along and picked it up before the hue and cry started. Dick Slayton, the knife-faced young sheriff, had been a little unpleasant about that affair, but Salamander had managed to brazen it out by spacing his drunks discreetly so as to give no indication of sudden affluence.

One more thing Salamander had learned in town. Perkins always left his horse on the ridge and scrambled down to the flat and traveled the two miles to town, afoot. That was what made the thing so easy. A lonesome dry-wash, a lone old man with five thousand, a cozy sumac clump for cover. Perfect!

THEIR man had dropped into a deeper part of the wash and was out of sight for a half-minute. "Damn ol' dew drinker shore is takin' his good time," Wolf grumbled. "That's th' way it alluz is with them newcomers. Too damn stubborn even to come along on time."

Wolf dropped his bearded cheek to the rifle-stock and inched his big, sweaty body forward a little. The crown of Perkins' battered grey hat was bobbing along the curve of the bushes, a hundred yards up the wash. Then his glasses showed, glistening among the dancing heat devils, then the wispy mustache, the thin, flannel-clad chest and lean, swinging arms. When the wash straightened, Salamander could see the erect body, even hear the tinkling spurs on the low-topped boots.

Disturbed by his approach, a little horned toad scuttled ahead of him for a little way, then took to the only available cover—the underslant of a little flat rock. Old Perkins grinned at the harmless little creature's futile attempt at concealment, and his cracked, but not unpleasant voice carried up to where the two lay: "Hidin', eh?

"Huh! Hell of a job of hidin', but it won't hurt me none to let yuh think yuh done it plumb successful." He crossed to the opposite side of the wash and passed the flat rock casually. A rod further on, he stopped and turned to squirt tobacco juice mischievously at the toad, which had scrambled out of hiding the moment he passed. "Hit 'er up, Ol' Timer! I'm 'bout to chaw yur tail some!"

Having had his little joke, the old man came on, slowed to kick a peculiar pebble with his boot, then glanced at the sun and quickened his pace.

Salamander squirmed uneasily as the tension tightened. Perkins was close in now. Why didn't Wolf poke out the rifle and bellow for the old simpleton to stop and throw it down? If he let him come nearer, there was a chance that he would see them through the brush screen and recognize them if he ever met——

The rifle kicked, roared, belched hot, stinking smoke that spiralled sluggishly upward in the still air. Wolf pumped a fresh cartridge into the chamber, tilted the muzzle toward its target again, then eased it down, chuckling hoarsely.

Old Perkins had jerked up on his toes, clutching at his thin chest with one grop-

ing hand, clawing at his holster with the other. Going through the motions of walking without getting forward an inch, he took a half-dozen jerky, irregular steps, then pitched forward on the rocky floor of the drain, rolled face upward, quivered the length of his lank body, lay still.

"Hell," Salamander gulped, a chill gripping his stomach, "what did yuh up an' do that fur?"

"Told yuh I'd make 'im drop it, didn't I?" Wolf chortled. "I alluz aim to do a little more than I say I will, so I dropped him along with it."

Salamander still felt uncomfortable. "But we coulda got th' cash without beefin' him. Maybe he'd argied a little, but——"

"Well, we'll git it, won't we? I don't believe he'll make us any argyment a-tall. What more do yuh want? C'mon. My fingers is itchin' to ketch hold of some real dinero."

Thirty minutes later they parted at the mouth of the wash. Wolf opened the fat wallet and counted out a hundred dollars for Salamander and a like amount for himself. "I'll cache th' rest of it an' lay out till they find th' ol' cuss an' th' rukus blows over.

"Yuh better go to some other town to have yur drunk. See yuh at th' Antlers, week frum today. We'll divvy up then, if things is quieted down."

SALAMANDER rode westward till he hit the ridge, then northward on a dim bridlepath that meandered along its flattened crest. He was utterly unfearful of immediate pursuit or eventual discovery. He was unrepentant, unpricked by conscience, but somehow vaguely depressed. Old Perkins had looked like a right good feller—akin to some Salamander would drench with liquor when he hit that other cowtown a dozen miles up north there.

He walked the pert little pinto through scattered scrub cedar, the trail swinging around an occasional lordly cottonwood or elm. He now was almost paralleling the wash in which the body lay, and it was not more than a furlong distant. He swung off the path by a short cut that circled an alder thicket and threaded a maze of crumbling brown boulders. As he emerged from among them, he reined in sharply when a horse neighed, close at hand. Walking the pinto forward, he came upon a rangy black gelding, saddled, and tied to a bush.

"Huh! Ol' Perkins' hawse. He left him here when he took to th' washes afoot." Salamander scowled thoughtfully for a time, then dismounted and unbuckled the

throatlatch. After slipping the bridle off, he struck the horse in the face with his hat. As the startled animal plunged away, he rebuckled the strap and allowed the bridle to drop and hang by its reins. "They'll think it crawled outa th' straps itself," he reasoned. "They'd go huntin' fur him all th' quicker if somebody come this way an' found it, tied an' starvin'."

Salamander remounted and was about to start when he chanced to glance down at the flat. Out among the crazy jumble of washes and boulders and rubble, a scintillating point of light caused his scowl to deepen and his frame to squirm uneasily in the saddle. From the elevation he was overlooking the floor of the wash—broad and shallow at the murder spot. The pinpoint of incandescence was sunlight reflected from the slain man's glasses. "Huh! Poor ol' cuss is hard to git away from." Salamander shrugged and roweled the inoffensive pinto to a fast lope.

The rat-a-plan of the loose horse's hoofs came back faintly for a time, dimming steadily as the animal forged ahead. Soon it was heard no more and Salamander be-

came lost in a hopeful dream, the central figure of which was a certain blonde dance-hall girl he would see before sundown, when he heard jogging hoofs ahead. The horse he had turned loose came almost nose to nose with the pinto before Salamander realized that it was being hazed back by a woman on a tackheaded roan. She was frail, grey, slightly stooped, yet somehow oddly youngish and virile. The neat, checked-gingham dress and sun-bonnet, the easy, confident way in which she rode a man's saddle, woman style, stirred something within Salamander. Then it came to him suddenly that she was the counterpart of another little grey woman whom he had left in a hill cabin in Tennessee, so many years before that he had lost count of them. Of course, that Tennessee woman had been dead for decades; but this one——

"Good morning." She pushed the sun-bonnet back and wiped her flushed face with a corner of her apron.

"Mornin'," Salamander gulped, awkwardly. Then, more by way of making conversation than anything else: "Want me to help yuh ketch that hawse?"

Her shrewd old eyes twinkled beneath the bonnet. "No, thank you. He slipped his bridle off somehow, so I'm taking him back. He's a good horse, but a little unreliable, at times.

"You see, he's my husband's saddler." She jerked her head toward the north. "We're settling up there a little way. We have our stock grazing here on the ridge, temporarily, and I was herding it while Mr. Perkins is in town."

PERKINS! Salamander barely repressed a startled oath. Perkins had a wife—perhaps children, big or small! He'd find that part out. Not that it could make any difference, now.

Well, he just wanted to find out. "Hereabouts, wimmin folks don't do a hull lot of cow-punchin', Ma'm," he suggested, craftily. "Most usual that's a man's job, though children does do it."

Her laugh was flute-like as a girl's. "Dear me! Our children have been grown and scattered for years. They're all back in Kansas, where we came from."

Salamander wanted a little more information. He fished for it, guardedly. " 'Scusin' th' remark, Ma'm, ain't yuh two mebbe a little mite old to start out ranchin' down here in deep Texas?

"Course, now, if yuh got plenty cash, an' just wanta kinda take it easy——"

"Oh dear me, no. Mr. Perkins is nearly seventy, but he's active and ener-

getic—unusually so, even if he were middle-aged.

"You see, he's a good woodsman—something rare in this section. He bought that tract of Harry Slater's. It has a lot of cedar on it, and Mr. Perkins had contracted to get out five thousand posts and deliver them in town, at fifteen cents each.

"We'll have eggs and milk and butter and garden stuff; so that seven hundred and fifty dollars will buy our supplies till we get our little ranch established." She laughed again, and shrugged her lean shoulders whimsically: "As to cash, we won't have any till we deliver some of the posts.

"As a matter of fact, we'll have to deliver some, right soon. I don't mind admitting that we have less than ten dollars to our names, after paying for the land."

She readjusted the bonnet and gathered her reins. "Well, I must be going. Have to retie that horse and get back to the cattle."

"Mebbe I better go 'long. Hawse might git snorky an' give yuh a tussle," Sala-

mander offered, gruffly. "I seen a bridle hangin' frum a limb 'bout a mile back there. Reckon that's where he b'longs."

"That's really kind of you," she smiled. "I'll admit that Nig does get rebellious, sometimes—that is, he does with me.

"He never gives Mr. Perkins any trouble. No animal ever does that."

SALAMANDER flicked the pinto undeservedly with his quirt. Mr. Perkins! Mr. Perkins! Mr. Perkins! . . . Hell! Couldn't she talk about somebody or something else?

Less than ten dollars in cash, and *she* couldn't get out any cedar post, even if she had the cedar—which she wouldn't, because that five thousand hadn't reached Slater.

A lean-ribbed old woman, a few thin cows, probably no house and certainly no means of support.

Damn Wolf Shivers, anyway! What did he hafta up an' plug old Perkins for.

She reined in suddenly, almost girlish excitement in her voice as she swept a slender arm out to point a gloved finger toward the flat. "Look! That must be a big diamond! See how it sparkles!"

Jerked away from his somber thoughts, Salamander felt that queer, sickening feeling tug at him again. They were opposite the murder spot once more. The sun still was glinting on those damned glasses. "There's th' bridle," he said, a little hoarsely. "I'll go 'head an' stop that hawse when he gits there!"

The black proved docile. Salamander retied him without trouble. He knew that it was a useless task, of course. Perkins wouldn't come for him. As he remounted, he noted that she was gazing at the flat again. "Mica," he explained. "That stuff shore does cut didoes when th' sun hits it."

Her seamed face registered eager interest. "How remarkable! I simply must go over there and see it at close range."

"Yu'll find plenty of it down th' ridge," Salamander told her, hastily. "Mebbe them cattle need a little lookin' after right now."

"To be sure," she laughed. "Really, it was childish of me to start after that plaything. As Mr. Perkins——"

Salamander's mind almost went blank. . . . Mr. Perkins! Mr. Perkins! Mr. Perkins!

Damn!

They loped down the trail, stirrups cuffing sociably. She bade him a cheery good-bye when they came to where the cattle were lolling among the cedars. A little way beyond, a fresh clearing on his left attracted his attention. There was their tent, a well, a make-shift corral, staked corners for a cabin that was to be made from the logs near-by—the cabin that never would be built.

SALAMANDER swore luridly and started on, halted, turned back, started again, irresolutely.

Then, wafted through a quarter of a mile of clear light air, a voice came—a motherly, "homey" voice, untrained, but steady and true-toned:

The door hing-es are of leath-er; the windows have no glass;
And the roof it lets the how-ling blizzard in.
And I hear the hungry coy-ote as he sneaks up through the grass,
'Round my lit-tle old sod shan-ty on the claim.

The song ended. With its ending, a wall seemed to have been erected, fencing Salamander off from something that belonged in the world—something that he couldn't quite analyze or assess, but which left him lonely when it departed. "Pore game ol' gal," he muttered. "Ain't no coyotes gonna yowl aroun' no shanty on that there claim."

Still muttering, he dismounted where a spring branch tumbled across the path. Loosening the pinto's cinches, he let him graze while his master slouched on a felled

cedar, smoking an endless chain of husk cigarettes in dour silence.

Finally he rummaged in his saddle pocket, producing a thumb-grimed sheet of paper and a stub pencil. Resolutely he wrote:

Sheruf Slaytun:
Wolf Shivers beefed ole Perkins. He's layin out somewheres beyant th ridge. Wolf's plumb yellow bellied. He will talk plenty if you twist his tail. He knows where that coin is cached. Git it an give it to th ole lady. Shee shore needs it. I'm a ole friend of them Perkinses, an I wanta see th pore ol gal git whats comin to her, yurs trooly

Maverick.

That night, Salamander crossed the flat on foot and sneaked into town to slide the note under the door of the sheriff's office. Two hours later, he was galloping toward the red liquor and dancing girls and whirling roulette wheels in that cowtown north of the point of the ridge.

FORTY-EIGHT hours brought Salamander Braley back to the ridge. The cowtown whiskey had been potent as ever; but, somehow, its effect was more depressing than exhilarating. He had broken about even at roulette and in an unexciting game of stud. The blonde dance hall girl had smirked dutifully, but her old charm was gone. So, for once in his adult existence, Salamander was coming back, sober and with money in his pocket—coming back, though he knew he should have kept the pinto's nose pointed northward and spurred him for a thousand miles.

Dusk had inked the swales and purpled the ridges when he came opposite the little tent. The flap was closed, and the canvas walls were pink from a light within. Scarcely conscious that he was doing it, Salamander neck-reined the pinto off the trail, whistling ostentatiously to announce his presence as he neared the tent.

The flap parted and the woman stood outlined in the opening, blinking uncertainly in the half light. "Oh it's you," she said, as he came nearer. "Light and come in. I'm about to have a little supper."

Her voice was weary, strained, but still brave.

"Awready et," Salamander lied, glibly. But he slid down and ground-hitched the pinto. Before going within, he politely removed his belt, tossing it onto the dry-goods box that served as her table, before seating himself on the nail keg she indicated.

Salamander was bent on being subtle. "Thought I'd stop by an' see how yuh folks is makin' it."

She shook her grey head slowly as she removed the coffee pot from the sheet iron

box stove and set it on the table. "I forgot, you've been away, so you wouldn't know.

"Mr. Perkins has been killed. They found his body this forenoon and have taken it to town for burial. So, I'm alone, now."

No tears. Not even a tremble in her smooth voice. Only the motherly eyes reflected the pain and sorrow that was wracking the stanch soul within that frail old body.

SALAMANDER had a question, the answer to which might affect his own destiny. After consoling her awkwardly, he asked it:

"Anybody got a idee who done that killin'?"

"Yes. They have a clue, and are searching for the man."

Salamander felt a little better. She had said man, not men.

She spooned a small quantity of potatoes from the frying pan into a tin plate and set it by Salamander's elbow, then placed biscuits beside it and poured his coffee. "Sheriff Slayton is a very close-mouthed man, but he appears hopeful that he will get the money back. I forgot to tell you that Mr. Perkins was robbed of five thousand dollars."

Salamander managed to display a proper surprise. "Do tell! Five thousan' bucks, eh? Beggin' pardon fur mebbe shootin' outa my turn, Ma'm, wasn't it kinda risky-like fur yur man to be packin' all that dinero?"

Hoofs welted the trail, subsided to a soft padding as they left it to approach the tent. Spurs jingled and boot heels chugged the sandy soil. The woman had started for the flap, when it was thrust open and Sheriff Slayton's tall figure showed in the opening. Looking past him, Salamander saw a half-dozen others still sitting their mounts.

Slayton flicked an eye toward Salamander and dropped a hand to his holster. He relaxed when Salamander jerked his head toward where his belt lay.

Someone had once described Slayton as "a man of long ropes and short words." He proved the aptness of that description. Drawing out a big, thick leather wallet that Salamander recognized, he tossed it on the table before the woman. "Got it," he said, succinctly, then turned to slit his keen eyes at Salamander. "Yuh can ride a ways with us."

Slayton bowed to the old woman, who stared abstractedly at the wallet, as one not particularly interested. Salamander caught up his belt, but hooked his arm through it, instead of buckling it on.

Outside, Salamander mounted the pinto, looping the belt over the horn. The sheriff gave a low-spoken order and one man dismounted, squatting before the tent, rifle across his lap—on guard.

The sheriff took to the trail, turning southward, toward town. Salamander followed, aware that a rider was on either side of him and that two more rode behind.

After a long mile covered at a jog in silence, Slayton turned off the trail by a cowpath that threaded a cedar brake. Seconds later, they emerged from the growing gloom into a circular glade centering which stood a blasted cedar, under which the little party halted. Salamander experienced a feeling of revulsion when his shoulder brushed against the bound feet of a body that dangled grotesquely from a horizontal limb overhead. "Hey, Slayton," he protested, shivering a little. "What did yuh head me in under that damn thing fur?"

"Worryin' yuh?" The sheriff worked his horse nearer.

"No but it—well, it makes me kinda creepy, an' it's skeerin' my hawse!"

"We'll be takin' th' hawse out, after a bit."

There was a short silence. The sheriff took a length of new rope off the horn of his saddle and commenced to uncoil it. "Wolf talked a plenty, onct he got started," someone back of Salamander explained.

"I reckoned he would," Salamander heard himself saying.

Slayton left off fiddling with the rope and jammed his mount against the pinto to lean over and peer into Salamander's face.

"You mean you writ that note?"

"Yeh."

Slayton reined around and started on the back trail.

"C'mon, boys."

Where the cowpath met the town trail the sheriff worked his horse in among the others and cut the pinto out as a cowman cuts a steer from the herd. Motioning the others townward, he stretched out a long arm to point northward along the silent ridge.

"Ride."

HAND DRUMS

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of
"Shanghai Sanctuary,"
"Special Warden," etc.

Honesty Was Always Jake Ahrens' Policy— Even with Crooks

THE sunset glinted briefly on Bill McKechnie's semi-bald head as he shook it before closing the battered tin cash box and carefully locking it in its drawer. Still deliberate of motion, he heaved his shapeless bulk to its feet and stared out of the hut's glassless window at the expanse of sapphire stretching away beyond the surf line.

The copra planter's bruised-looking, red features, indistinct behind a blue-black stubble, were as much in contrast to the alert bronze visage of the man before him as were his spotted and oil-stained trousers to the clean white ducks of his guest who sat uncomfortably perched on the edge of a rickety cane chair.

The man in clean ducks looked up with a poignant, unvoiced appeal in deep-set gray eyes. "I—I suppose that's all you can lend me, Bill?"

"That twenty," stated McKechnie, hitching his trousers higher on a shirt that was food-stained over the belly, "is the last cent I can loan you, Jake, and I've lent you a damned sight too much already. If a company inspector was to look in my till, I'd be fired like that."

His stubby, brown fingers snapped, making a faint incisive report in the stuffy little office with the fly-blown grass curtains and sheet iron walls.

The tall man on the chair's edge nodded vacantly several times, like a mechanical toy. "I know, Bill, but I've got to find five hundred more," he muttered with sudden fierceness. *"Got to*—see?"

"I've loaned you four hundred bucks, and that's a heap more than I'd lend anybody but Jake Ahrens. As it is, I know your word's good."

Ahrens straightened his inadequate shoulders a little beneath the clean white ducks, in a hopeless defiance of unpleasant fact. "Of course I'll pay you back. We Ahrens have always been honest——"

The planter's bloodshot blue eyes flickered up. "So it's five hundred you need, eh? How come?" he demanded curiously.

"What with all yer eternal penny pinchin' you ought to have had enough by now."

"I did have," replied Ahrens in a savage monotone. "But just when I was plannin' to sell my Aztec Steel shares—it—well, it took a drop—a hell of a drop." He made a little helpless gesture with his wide brown hands. "Over a thousand dollars gone in a few hours. Oh, sure—now, I know I was a damned fool to put all the eggs in that one basket. But somehow it ain't right, Bill—I worked hard to save that thousand—you know a cable operator don't get so much."

McKechnie's untidy bulk turned deliberately, passed the window and darkened the room, then sank into a chair that whined softly beneath his body. Finally he fell to regarding the frayed brown stump of his cigar with an elaborate interest.

"I think you're crazy, Jake," he remarked, while the other absently fanned away a fly which persisted in settling on his saddle-coloured forehead. "You're makin' mountains outta mole-hills. 'Thea's all right here on Nanomea."

"She's not," grimly contradicted Ahrens. "She's gettin' pretty and Althea ain't a kid any longer. When she was little it was all right for her to play with old Arorai's and Nonuti's brats. But now she's goin' on fifteen and—well, that big half-breed whelp o' Nukuno's hangin' around the cable station a heap too much lately. What with these full moons and such——No, Bill, she's goin' to leave Nanomea on old man Carlson's *Santa Anna.*"

"She won't," grunted McKechnie, crushing a vivid green spider under the heel of his rope sandal, "there ain't five hundred dollars more on the whole o' Nanomea. Better let her wait until the next boat—that'll give you six months to raise the dough."

The tall man in white got up, his narrow, graying head almost touching the dry brown palm thatch. "That's the hell of it, Bill, I can't," he said, hoarsely. "Althea's entered into a convent that's mighty hard to get into, and they'll look out for her there. They've fixed her up a scholarship this year. Next year somebody else gets it. Girls' schools is expensive, Bill, terrible expensive."

Frowning, Jake Ahrens stared at the scuffed and food-stained mat beneath his feet. "It's her one chance to be a lady like her ma was—not just an island slattern. Don't laugh, Bill; that's what happens to 'em all—I know—I've been out over twenty years now. Johnny Ketram's girl, little Jenny MacPherson and—oh, hell—same old story over and over. Too many lovers, lose their looks—some quicker than others—and then it's death or the China Coast."

"Same thing, Jake—same thing."

"That's what's facing Althea, Bill, and it's driving me loony."

"For her to earn a scholarship you must ha' taught her mighty well," commented the planter, while the cigar stump travelled jerkily from one corner of his mouth to the other. "You must have had a good education yourself—once."

"Yes, once, but it wasn't nothin' much. Oh, I was startin' out well—but somethin' happened. I ain't kickin', Nanomea ain't a bad place—for me. But the Sisters on the mainland will take Althea, teach her, polish her, and then she'll stay with some relations of old man Carlson's and get her a fair chance in life."

BILL McKECHNIE'S food-spotted belly trembled as he squirmed on his chair. "Jake, I'm sorry fer you, but you'd better face facts. There ain't five hundred dollars more on the whole of Nanomea."

"Mebbe and mebbe not," muttered the tall, thin man with obstinacy of one who dares not depart from his fixed purpose. "When I think of her ma—well," Ahrens' voice became terribly intent, "come hell or high tide, Althea's goin' out on the *Santa Anna* to-morrow."

Silently, the copra planter regarded the other with curious reddened eyes. "I suppose, Jake, you know you'll lose her—for good. What'll 'Thea think o' Nanomea

and—us, after she's had her schooling? If——"

"Shut up! Don't you think I know it? Think it's easy to send her away?"

"Well, cheer up, Jake, she ain't gone yet."

"No. But she's goin', if I have to do murder to send her!"

"By God, I believe you would."

Yet when the rust-streaked little *Santa Anna* let go her anchor a hundred yards or so off the end of the oil-stained copra pier, Jake was not a cent nearer the goal.

Quite oblivious to the gulls screaming excitedly overhead, unnoticing of the slow hiss of waves up the beach, Ahrens swung along the worn timbers of the wharf, his

eyes fixed on a dingy little white rowboat which, propelled by long, awkwardly handled oars, was creeping shorewards.

That would be old man Carlson swaying in the stern and boldly outlined against the throbbing blueness of the sea. Ahrens, his spruce white figure standing out among the brown bodies of the natives and the soiled garments of Nanomea's European inhabitants, sharp as a snowdrift on a barn floor, watched the bobbing boat draw near and noted, with faint surprise, the warmth of the greeting which old man Carlson waved at him. Money? Not five hundred more on all Nanomea. But on the *Santa Anna?*

Nearer the *Santa Anna's* dingy whale boat rode the leisurely blue rollers. Now he could see old man Carlson's ratty yellow moustache with its inner fringe dyed brown by eternal tobacco juice.

"Hi, Jake," he called.

"Hello, Hjalmar."

"Vhat's new on Nanomea?"

With a great deal of laughing and flashing of white teeth, native Nanomeans caught the rowboat's painter and fended off the blunt prow when old man Carlson made a bad landing. Ahrens wondered. That landing had been bad because old man Carlson had been looking at him with a queer, searching look in his piggy blue eyes.

Twenty minutes later the *Santa Anna's* jovial blond captain sank on to a green painted rocker on the porch of the cable station and shoved on to the back of his head a cap of rusty blue serge whose gold embroidery was greened by verdigris and badly spotted with salt water.

"My," he remarked, "your little Althea, she ain'dt little no more. Ay am surprised, the last time Ay vass here she vass yet a little girl."

All the time old man Carlson's round blue eyes kept peering from beneath those half-moon eyeglasses of his, but the cable operator seemed too preoccupied to notice it.

FOR several minutes they talked disjointedly of island gossip; of copra prices and of the disastrous Socialist experiment in New Zealand. No, it was not good for shipping. Yes, Carlson thought it would not last long. No, he had not heard about the *Blue Bay's* breaking her back on an uncharted coral reef. Too bad, old Joe McCabe had lost every cent in her.

Steadily, like tired animals climbing a hill the sentences grew briefer, more laboured, until it became inescapable that neither man cared a hoot in hell what they were talking about.

Old man Carlson suddenly heaved his big figure to its feet and crossed to the window, looked out, then opened the door and lastly glanced to the living quarters of the cable station.

"No, Althea ain't here. She's gone swimming," said Ahrens shortly. "What's on your mind, Hjalmar? Get it off your chest in a hurry. I—I've got somethin' I want to ask you."

Deliberately old man Carlson returned to the rocker, pulled out a shapeless black

pipe and, while the office of the cable station became strangely silent, loaded it with preposterous care. This done he stuck the pipe in his mouth, immediately pulled it out again, and leaned forward, his flat red face—he never seemed to tan—out-thrust. Suddenly old man Carlson's lips parted to display a sad array of broken and yellowed teeth, and he began to talk in halting, guarded accents..

"In Vellington last month Ay met a man—he said he knew you. His name vass Leonard—A. J. Leonard."

"Yes, I know him. A. J. Leonard happens to be my boss."

"Yess, yess." Old man Carlson's round head inclined several times and he stared fixedly at the scoured, red-tiled floor. "Yess," he said, "he knows you. Vell, Jake, he vants you should do him a favor."

The cable operator's thin eyebrows met in a single sharp line. Something about old man Carlson's manner made him uneasy.

"I'll be glad to oblige him, provided it's an honest matter. My family's always stood for honesty."

Old man Carlson's bloodshot blue eyes narrowed and the pink tip of his tongue wetted his lips. "Yess, Ay know that, Jake, Ay know that."

A brief silence fell in which the subdued thunder of the surf on the distant barrier reefs sounded monotonously. "You vould like to do Mr. Leonard a favor, no?"

"Of course. Any man likes to stand in with his boss. What is this favor?"

Instead of replying, old man Carlson pulled out a box of matches and, gripping the match stick, which looked very tiny between his stubby, calloused fingers, he struck a light.

"And it's a favor to me, too, Jake," he added. "There's money in it for us both. You know Ay've——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Ahrens. "I'll never forget."

Both men were thinking of one turbulent day some sixteen years gone, when Hjalmar Carlson had risked the boilers of his ship, his job and life, in running through half a typhoon in search of a doctor to help Mariana Ahrens bring Althea into a wind-lashed world.

"Well?" Pulses quickening a little with an unidentified premonition, Ahrens eyed the big man who seemed to overflow even the green rocker's ample seat.

"It ain'dt much, this favor," went on old man Carlson deliberately, "but it means a thousand for me and a thousand for you."

Jake Ahrens went a little pale as he stiffened in the cane-bottomed chair and stared at the speaker. "A—a thousand dollars!" he stammered. "God! A thousand dollars, a thousand dollars!" The words echoed and re-echoed through his brain. No more Nukuno! "I'd do a lot for a thousand dollars now," he said jerkily. "I'll do anything—anything honest, Hjalmar!"

Old man Carlson threw away the stump of his unused match. "Now listen, Jake," he began. "This favor ain'dt much, it'll take you less than a minute and, Jake, Ay need the money—need it bad. Ay got to take up my share in the *Santa Anna* this trip, or else—" Large and blond-haired tattooed hands were flung out with an air of unmistakable finality. "Freights ain'dt so good these days, Jake, not so good."

Small eyes looking very blue in the flat red expanse of face, Captain Hjalmar Carlson looked up anxiously and beheld Ahrens' white-clad figure sitting rigid; how prominently his Indian-like cheekbones shone in that hot glare beating through the glassless window.

"You need money, too," he hurried on. "Ay know. They told me in Vellington vot happened to your stock shares. You must have lost a lot of money, Jake."

"Yes, I did lose a lot of money."

"And there's the little girl."

"Yes, there's Althea, but I ain't going to do anything crooked."

OLD man Carlson hesitated and blinked, not wholly discouraged. Did Jake Ahrens for once sound as though he did not

mean what he was saying? Carlson suddenly began talking very fast.

"Look here, Jake, here iss the proposition. There iss in the United States vun big man—so you vould understand easy I vill call him Mr. W.—Leonard says Mr. W. iss a very rich man, owns lots of companies, but he ain'dt got no more heart than—than—" Old man Carlson, momentarily at a loss, glanced out of the window and, grunting in satisfaction, pointed to a tiny black triangle cruising smoothly along through the sapphire water a few yards from the surf line—"than that tiger shark out there."

"Well, Hjalmar, get on with it," Jake Ahrens said stonily, as though he didn't want to.

"This Mr. W. vanted to buy still more companies, so Mr. Leonard said, to raise money he give for security ranches he owns in New Zealand. But things yoost now have not gone vell with this Mr. W. and his creditors have cabled out to learn the value of his holdings. If they good—"old man Carlson leaned forward and fixed his host with the well-gnawed rubber mouthpiece of his pipe—"if they good," he repeated, "then they extend his note. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And if they bad, then they foreclose and Mr. W. and all his companies go into bankruptcy."

"Where does Leonard stand in on this?"

The sea captain in dirty white ducks sighed, pulled out a blue bandanna and mopped the red expanse of his brow.

"He has much moneys in companies that'll clean up if Mr. W. goes broke."

"Oh, I get it. Well, what do you want me to do?"

Old man Carlson sighed. "That's good, Jake, good. Ay had hoped you vould be reasonable."

"I haven't promised yet."

"Vell, here it iss. Mr. Leonard vants you should intercept that report from New Zealand, vhen it iss sent here for relay to America."

"I see. And then?"

Ahrens' gray eyes wandered off to an array of gleaming instruments, bulbs and wire fittings filling the far end of the cable office. Presently they returned to search the sea captain's heavy red features..

"Vhen that message comes through," continued the old man Carlson, and the sweat began to bead his shiny red forehead, "Mr. Leonard vants you should throw it away. Instead you vill send vhat iss in here."

From inside his frayed white uniform coat the *Santa Anna's* captain pulled forth a crisp white envelope which bore no heading nor mark of any kind.

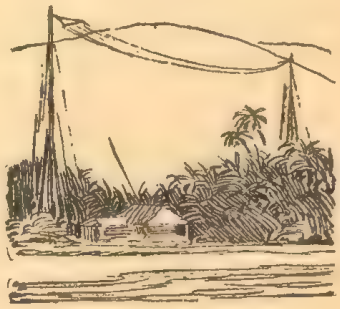
"I see." Ahrens' erect, white figure suddenly seemed to lose its starch and he sagged forward, eyes on his white canvas shoes. "He wants me to send a false message. Is that it?"

"Oh, it ain'dt so bad as all that."

"But it is." Ancestors, long buried on bleak New England hillsides, forbade equivocation.

"It ain'dt much, iss it now, Jake?" How pathetically anxious was old man Carlson.

"It's a lot," cried Ahrens so breathlessly he had to fight to get out his next words.



"I won't do it. We've always been honest in my family——"

A dull flush climbed into the sea captain's wind-reddened features. "Don't be vun big fool," he rumbled. "You don't earn that much in ten months' work. You need that thousand, Jake."

Ahrens' shoulders seemed to sway under invisible blows. "But I won't," he said obstinately. "I won't."

"Vhat iss this Mr. W. to you?" demanded old man Carlson. "He's yoost another rich feller back in the States. He's got plenty of money no matter vhat happens. Come on, Jake, don't be a damn fool—Ay——" Old man Carlson broke off suddenly for there came the light patter of feet, and Althea appeared in the doorway, dripping, laughing, and with her coppery hair floating over her slender shoulders like a lustrous banner.

"Yess, and aboard iss a nice Dutch lady. My cousin said——"

"Well——" cut in Ahrens while the whole white-washed office whirled about his head. "Well, Hjalmar, I—I——"

"You vill?"

"I'll think it over. Come here at quarter of nine—and," he added grimly, "bring the envelope and that thousand dollars."

THE sun had vanished with that abruptness peculiar to the tropics, and, like a relieving sentry, a great throbbing moon appeared over the Pacific. Then Jake Ahrens beheld the white outline of old man Carlson's square figure advancing from the wharf. Beyond him the lights of the *Santa Anna* blinked drowsily.

Funny, mused Jake, Hjalmar always walked with that little rolling motion. He wondered briefly what was going on in Hjalmar's head. Certainly not one fraction of the doubt which still racked him so viciously. By his sides the cable operator's bony brown hands opened and shut convulsively when old man Carlson's cigar came straight towards him, all the time winking like a giant firefly. Now he had passed the clump of cocoa palms standing like graceful pillars to mark the upper edge of the beach, now he had actually put foot to the cable station's walk.

Stifled, Ahrens stepped out of doors, gazed up at the hot diamantine stars and drew several deep breaths. It was a trick he had when seeking to master himself. He had done it that day when he stood up to bear his sentence.

"Hello, Jake. Nice night, ain'dt it? Bill McKechnie vass saying he iss about finished loading. Ve vill pull out at dawn."

The voice sounded entirely calm and untroubled, but when the sea captain drew nearer, Ahrens read the poignant anxiety in those flat, red features. Moreover, old man Carlson was tugging nervously at that tobacco-stained yellow moustache of his. He glanced about in silent inquiry.

"It's all right," Ahrens informed his guest, "I sent Althea over to dance at old Arorai's. She won't be back until ten."

"To pack?" quickly demanded Carlson.

Ahrens only half stifled a groan. "I—I—" he began uncertainly.

Old man Carlson pitched his cigar stub on to the stand. "Look here," he said hoarsely, "fine notions iss all very vell, but don't forget this, Mr. Leonard has only to say a vord and there'll be a new operator on Nanomea. You know that."

"Oh shut up!" snarled the gaunt man in white. "Don't you think I know that?"

"Vell, then, vhat's biting you?"

From beyond the palms floated a sensuous obligato of rhythmically throbbing hand drums mingled with plaintive melodies sung by Arorai's guests. Over there Althea probably was dancing as only Althea could. Paradoxically enough, she, the foreigner, could out-dance any of the laughing brown maidens of Nanomea and, in a certain shamefaced way, Ahrens was proud of her triumphs. But when he thought of Althea's mother, what she would have thought of such dances—his long jaw shut with a click.

"You're right, Hjalmar," he said as though each word were dragged out by a windlass, "I'm a fool, a damned fool."

A penetrating silence followed, then the cable operator turned and walked indoors, his rope-soled shoes scuffing softly over the red-tiled floor. After him stumbled old man Carlson, grinning nervously and tugging at his yellow walrus moustache.

Faster than those hand drums in the distance throbbed Jake Ahrens' heart, He wondered if right now he wasn't feeling some of those sensations experienced by a

felon who leaves the condemned cell for execution.

"Death!" He shuddered. Well, it was death of a sort, death of principles, the death of self respect; yet he felt quite calm when he sat down at the instrument board and threw over various switches. It was good to have made the decision. At his elbow stood old man Carlson with the apparatus lights minutely reflected in his slightly rheumy blue eyes.

With a sudden gesture, Ahrens snapped on the electro magnet dynamo and a gentle humming sound pervaded the cable station. Unseeingly, he studied the little ink-wheel poised ready above a narrow strip of paper which travelled between the instrument's two reels. How often had he seen that ink-wheel whirl and spin, flicking down the dots and dashes. Mechanically, he checked the tape to see that the perforations were squarely over the cogs in the control wheel.

He drew a deep breath. "It's hot," he muttered and glanced up nervously. Old man Carlson was standing over him, sweating also; tiny beads shone bright on his broad red forehead and his eyes looked bluer and rounder than ever.

The mechanism emitted a tiny, premonitory buzz. Jake Ahrens whirled, his eyes riveted on the tape; it had begun to move. The wheel commenced to spin and Ahrens' thin lips fluttered as he silently read the first few letters.

"Iss that it?" growled old man Carlson, one sausage-like forefinger levelled at the busy wheel.

"No, it's only a news item—something about an election in the States."

Save for the steady humming of the dynamo and the throb of those distant hand drums, silence reigned. Then all at once Ahrens leaned forward. "Here it is—'To the Banker's Credit Corporation, New York City.'"

Swiftly the operator's fingers jotted down the message. "Investigation Wanganui ranches completed. Property well above estimated value. Other holdings—" Ahrens' eyes flickered from tape to scratch pad and back again, "excellent condition. Fully recommend Lucius B. Williams' property."

WITH a strangled cry, Ahrens leaped up, his chair crashing noisily to the tiles.

"Vhat's the matter?" cried old man Carlson, flinging up a warding hand.

But Jake Ahrens never heard him; he stood staring with terrible intensity at the blank wall in front of him while the tape, marked with innumerable little black dots, slid smoothly, relentlessly on.

"Lucius B. Williams!" he muttered hoarsely. Before his mind's eye was materialising a scene not dimmed by the passage of twenty years. To the last detail he could see again a dingy little court room, a mere boy, pale and quivering, in the dock and crying in dreadful earnestness—"I had nothing to do with it! Even if the money is missing, I know nothing about it. My family has been honest for two hundred years." He could recall every line on the tired, sympathetic face of old Judge McCormick. But most clearly of all, he could see the hard young features of Lucius B. Williams. Ever so clearly he could hear the accuser's voice, cold as a grinding of an ice floe. So Mr. W. was Lucius Williams!

"The circumstances prove that Ahrens was in the office at that time. Every bit of evidence points to him as the guilty party. I demand that he be made an example!"

At the memory of Williams' savage perseverance in building up his disastrously convincing net of evidence, Ahrens' face flamed a mahogany red. In a word, his conviction had been entirely the work of his implacable employer.

Seemingly from a vast distance came the dull hum of the dynamo and old man Carlson's thick voice. "You gone crazy, Jake?"

Numbly, the cable operator's head swayed. "No," he said, and drew a deep breath. "I had my best chance twenty years ago. Where's that envelope?"

With precise, unimpassioned movements,

he stooped, righted the chair and sat down again. But for all his assumed calm new, harsh lines travelled from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth, as he briefly transcribed the rest of the report from Wellington.

"Here iss the message you must send instead." Old man Carlson held out that crisp white envelope which contained a death warrant for Lucius B. Williams' fortune.

The ripping paper made a harsh, snarling sound as Ahrens tore off the end of the envelope. He blew into it and plucked forth a single sheet of foolscap.

He inched his chair a foot to the right where the sounding key glistened brazenly. Like a great puzzled bear, the sea captain stood watching. With brisk decisive movements Ahrens snapped-to a number of switches, then flattened the false message and read it over. It said: "Holdings Lucius B. Williams in very poor condition. Find estimated worth much in excess of actual cash value. Giddings and Co."

"You'll send it?" Old man Carlson almost panted the question as he shuffled

forward, his eyes fixed on the black rubber key beneath Ahrens' forefinger.

The cable operator drew a deep breath, raised his colorless head and glanced directly before him; yonder a faded photograph of a young man and a young woman in long out-moded clothes looked forth from a sandalwood frame. How very much the girl's eyes resembled Althea's. Over the key his sunburnt finger hovered uncertainly. In his brain a vast maelstrom of emotions commenced to whirl.

"Vell, Jake," hoarsely demanded the sea captain behind him. "Ain'dt you going to send it?"

Once more Ahrens filled his lungs, then his forefinger commenced to tap out the message.

When he had finished, he slumped forward, rested his elbows on the sending desk and buried his face between long brown fingers that quivered violently. A puff of wind came in through the window and blew the loose sheet of paper to the floor, where it rustled softly; then old man Carlson sighed, picked it up, then reaching forward, patted the bent, white clad figure clumsily.

"Good boy," he rumbled, "Ay knew you vould. Here's the thousand."

He laid ten crisp hundred-dollar bills on the desk beside the instrument, but Jake Ahrens moved not at all.

"Come," the sea captain spoke with forced jocularity, "come on, now ve go get Althea and help her pack."

"Althea!" The word was almost strangled in its enunciation, then Ahrens lifted a blanched and tragic face. "Althea's not going," he said dully.

"Vhat? You changed your mind?"

"No, no, Hjalmar. Take the money, I—I—didn't earn it."

"Vhat?" Old man Carlson staggered as though a bullet had struck him. "Vhat, *you didn't send Mr. Leonard's message?*"

"No," the words were hardly more than a whisper, "I—I sent the right message. We Ahrenses have always been honest——" He broke off, the bewildered reproach in Hjalmar Carlson's blue eyes being quite unbearable. The big man just stood looking, looking at the bent white figure.

"You've lost me my ship, Jake," he muttered, and then without another word turned on his heel and stumbled out.

LOUDER swelled the rumble of those hand drums beyond the palms, higher swung the honey-colored moon and the soft diapason thunder of the surf on the outer beach droned on and on.

At the end of the copra wharf sat old man Carlson, looking with hopeless eyes upon the ship he had lost. In the tile and

coral block cable station, Jake Ahrens was stonily receiving messages from San Francisco, for relay to New Zealand.

His brain buzzed. Stock market reports. Who in hell cared about stock market reports? Damn the stock market anyway! That was what had caused the whole trouble. If Aztec Steel hadn't gone off ten points he wouldn't have lost that thousand dollars.

Mechanically, his eye translated a report. "Credit information from New Zealand just received persuaded creditors to extend Lucius Williams further credit aid. Share values in Williams-controlled companies jumped as follows: American Copper Ore up twenty; Green Bay Smelting up fifteen; Aztec Steel—" Jake Ahrens clutched the edge of the desk and his body swayed as though shaken by invisible blows. "Aztec Steel up *twenty-seven and a half!*"

A moment he stared incredulously at the series of dots and dashes, then whirled, dashed out of the door and pounded headlong down the moonlit beach towards the wharf.

"Hjalmar!" His breath halted. The big sea captain's dejected figure had vanished from the end of the pier. An icy wave of fear engulfed him.

"Hjalmar!" Where was he? Jake shuddered when a streak of phosphorus betrayed the passage of a long gray body and a triangular black fin.

"Hjalmar!" Louder rang Ahrens' cry. Shaken with a strange dread he rushed forward. Voices sounded out of sight below the end of the pier and he heard the dull clunk of oars in their rowlocks.

"Ja?"

An overwhelming wave of relief came to still that frantic fear. "Hjalmar! I—I—Wait! You won't lose the *Santa Anna!* The Aztec Steel's up twenty-seven—I've got money—a lot of money. I just heard."

"Ja?" In the stern of the *Santa Anna's* battered little tender old man Carlson raised a flat, amazed face; the moon caught it and dyed it a deep orange. "Vhat you say?"

"Your Mr. W. owned the Aztec. Come ashore and I'll tell you."

Come ashore old man Carlson did and, when Ahrens had finished, the *Santa Anna's* master only uttered a throaty laugh before turning heavily back towards that boat which bobbed beside the landing stage.

"Hey! Where you going, Hjalmar?"

"Ay think Ay go out and fix up that cabin for you an' Althea," chuckled old man Carlson.

"Me?"

"Sure. You always wanted to go to sea, Ay sell you half interest in the *Santa Anna*, no?"

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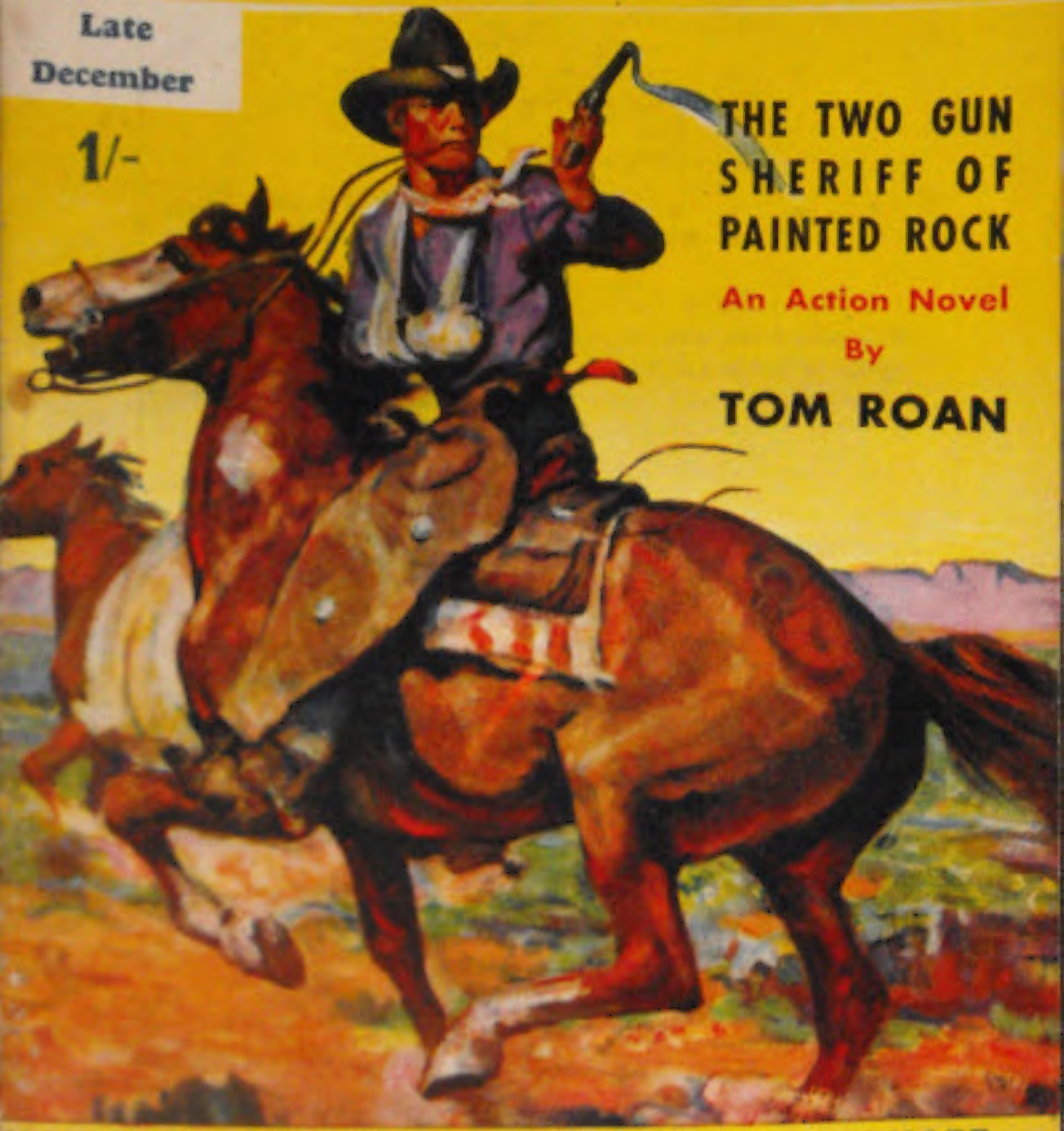

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